

Potomac Torah Study Center

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NOTE: Devrei Torah presented weekly in Loving Memory of Rabbi Leonard S. Cahan z"l, Rabbi Emeritus of Congregation Har Shalom, who started me on my road to learning more than 50 years ago and was our family Rebbe and close friend until his untimely death.

Devrei Torah are now Available for Download (normally by noon on Fridays) from www.PotomacTorah.org. Thanks to Bill Landau for hosting the Devrei Torah archives.

Bikur Cholim of Greater Washington, with the help of countless volunteers, has been assisting thousands of our people every year for approximately a quarter century. Requests for assistance have been increasing rapidly, and BCGW currently has a matching fund with a goal of raising \$400,000 during this period leading to the High Holy Days. We would appreciate additional volunteers and financial donations. Please contact <https://causematch.com/bikurcholimgw/128650> Thank you.

As I write, it is barely a week to Rosh Hashanah. How has the year gone by so quickly? Rabbi David Fohrman, as usual, provides a key insight to Moshe's message to B'Nai Yisrael on the final day of his life. Moshe has just concluded his long description of the blessings of following the mitzvot and horrifying curses that will chase us if we ignore the mitzvot (Ki Tavo). As part of the ceremony of bikkurim (bringing some of the first fruits to the Kohanim), B'Nai Yisrael are to be glad before Hashem (26:11; 27: 7). Moshe adds that part of the joy of having plenty and being able to share that joy with Hashem includes sharing with others. We are to share this joy and plenty with the Levite and the proselyte in our midst (26:11). We are also to share with the orphan and widow (26:12). We are to testify to Hashem that we have met these obligations.

Nitzavim and Vayeilech continue with this message from Moshe, as he reminds B'Nai Yisrael that this covenant is binding on all generations of Jews. The message of our obligation to share with the priests, widows, orphans, immigrants, and other needy members of our community comes through in numerous parts of the Torah. To select only one example, Mishpatim, which provides 51 concrete examples of mitzvot from the Aseret Dibrot (Rambam's count), focuses primarily on laws that protect the weak and needy in society. The messages of the prophets also focus heavily on chiding the people for not assisting the needy enough.

In our community, **Bikur Cholim of Greater Washington** has had an explosion of requests for assistance in recent years. This outstanding organization is devoting the first three days after Shabbat to seeking donations (for a matching campaign) and volunteers to help meet a vast increase in solicitations from needy Jews (and others) – exactly the people that the Torah and prophets have been asking B'Nai Yisrael to remember for more than three thousand years. Our tradition of chesed goes back to Avraham Avinu. Many Jewish communities throughout the world follow the example of Avraham, Moshe, and Jewish tradition in helping the needy. As we prepare for the High Holy Days, hopefully many of us will increase our levels of support for Bikur Cholim – both in terms of financial donations and volunteer work.

A part of every Jew was present at Har Sinai for the Revelation. Our people have always had a tradition of chesed – kindness – toward the needy. As we approach the judgment of the balance between our mitzvot and our sins, chesed is an important part of earning another year of life. Our beloved Rebbe, Rabbi Leonard Cahan, z"l, reminded our

congregation frequently of our obligation to support the needy in our community (locally and elsewhere). Hannah and I have always tried to teach this lesson to our children and now to our grandchildren.

Shabbat Shalom. Kativah v'chatima tovah.

Alan and Hannah

Much of the inspiration for my weekly Dvar Torah message comes from the insights of Rabbi David Fohrman and his team of scholars at www.alephbeta.org. Please join me in supporting this wonderful organization, which has increased its scholarly work during and since the pandemic, despite many of its supporters having to cut back on their donations.

Please daven for a Refuah Shlemah for Hershel Tzvi ben Chana, Arye Don ben Tzivia, Reuven ben Basha Chaya Zlata Lana, Yoram Ben Shoshana, Leib Dovid ben Etel, Asher Shlomo ben Ettie, Avraham ben Gavriela, Mordechai ben Chaya, Hershel Tzvi ben Chana, Uzi Yehuda ben Mirda Behla, David Moshe ben Raizel; Zvi ben Sara Chaya, Eliav Yerachmiel ben Sara Dina, Reuven ben Masha, Meir ben Sara, Oscar ben Simcha; Leah bas Gussie Tovah, Sarah Feige bat Chaya, Sharon bat Sarah, Noa Shachar bat Avigael, Kayla bat Ester, and Malka bat Simcha, who need our prayers. Please contact me for any additions or subtractions. Thank you.

Shabbat Shalom; Hodesh Tov,

Hannah & Alan

Netzavim Vayeilech: It's Already in Your Mouth

By Rabbi Label Lam * © 5758

Because these mitzvos that I command you today are not too wondrous for you neither are they so distant from you. It is not in heaven that it should be said; "Who will ascend the heavens for us and will take it for us and we will listen to it and do it!" And neither is it on the other side of the sea that it should be said; "Who will cross the ocean for us and will take it for us and we will listen to it and do it!" Rather, the matter is close to you very much so, in your mouth and in your heart to do it. See I place before you today the life and the good and the death and the bad. (Devarim 30: 11-15)

Occasionally someone looking for his pencil finds it perched above his ear. It's comical to watch as the frustrated fellow turns every object on the desk over and looks suspiciously at each person till the dawn of reality. It's often the same one who can't find his or her glasses searching furiously till passing a mirror it becomes clear that they have been parked on top all along. How foolish we feel when it's us!

Similarly, I recall two wonderful learning sessions I had with Mike, on the top floor of Jerusalem II in Manhattan. Mike had agreed to try learning Torah under the pretense that he had seen the movie but had not yet read the book. Mike had read most of western literature and much of it in its original vernacular. However, his own Torah had remained covered with the dust of recent history. He agreed to review with me as one would study another ancient text or source document critically combing through the words to determine their hidden meanings.

We were there in the pizza shop with hippety hop music on volume 8, not quite the perfect environment for task, but it work fine for us. Within a short period of time we were transported to another time and place. The first hour passed and soon Mike looked with a panic at his watch realizing that a second hour had passed and he was well over due to get back to work.

The next week it was the same time and place and Mike with his deeply skeptical nature and critical mind was there with me the books and some pizza for round two. Now, somewhere in the middle of the session Mike opened his mouth and said one of the most remarkable innocent testimonies that I have ever heard. From nowhere he simply declared, "I feel like I have learned all this somewhere before!" He paused, absorbed in the reverie of the de ja vu experience. I didn't offer the explanation that exploded to the front of my mind at the time. I gazed back with equal contemplation and said, "MMMM, that's interesting!"

I didn't think Mike was ready to hear it. It was our last session together before work got too busy for him, shame, but his words still echo in my ears. I don't believe he was ready to accept that the Talmud in Tractate Niddah tells that a fetus in its mother's womb can see from one end of the world to another and an angel learns the entire Torah with the child. Now, right before the actual birth, the child is made to forget all the learning. Our modern psychologists tell us the nothing is really forgotten, but rather it is stored somewhere deep in the psyche. The person seeks to rediscover Torah not merely to learn it anew. It's a dusting off process; a visit to an old prenatal memory.

With Mike's words I better understood the meaning of the verse mentioned above, "*The matter is close to you very much so. It is not too wondrous for you or too far off. It is in your heart and mouth to do it!*" We look for it all over the world and in Jerusalem II and there it is parked on top of our head between our ears. The language is not so foreign nor the expectations so outrageous. It is at least as tasty as a slice of pie and it's already in your mouth.

<https://torah.org/torah-portion/dvartorah-5760-netzavim/>

The Triumph of Hope Over Experience

by Rabbi Dov Linzer, Rosh HaYeshiva, Yeshivat Chovevei Torah © 2012, 2023

Can a relationship survive after one of the parties has gone astray, has been unfaithful, or has just constantly failed to keep up his end, his responsibilities? Parashat Nitzavim and Parashat Bechukotai offer two different answers to this question.

Both Nitzavim and Bechukotai describe the aftermath of Israel's sinning against God, and of their having suffered and been punished as a result. However, the meaning of that suffering, and the state of the relationship that follows, differs radically in these two parshiyot. In Bechukotai, the focus is on the past sins. We are punished for our sins, we confess our sins, and while God does not abandon us, our relationship with God, even after the punishment and the confessing, remains distant and chilly. In Nitzavim, in contrast, the focus is on our moral character and our relationship with God. Our suffering leads to self-reflection, which leads to a returning to God, and this creates a new relationship, a stronger relationship, a lasting relationship.

In both parshiyot, the words shav, to return, and its near-homonym, shavat, to rest, play a central role, appearing seven times in near proximity in each parasha. Bechukotai follows closely on the heels of Behar, which focused on the Sabbatical Year, the command to let the land rest one out of every seven years. In its transgressions, Israel abandons these practices, and it is only during exile when the land can once again rest:

Then shall the land enjoy her Sabbaths, shabtoteha, as long as it lies desolate, and you be in your enemies' land; even then shall the land rest, tishbot, and enjoy her Sabbaths, shabtoteha. As long as it lies desolate it shall rest, tishbot; because it did not rest, shavta, in your Sabbaths, bi'shabitoteichem, when you dwelt, bi'sivtikhem, upon it. (Vayikra 26:34-35)

The goal, then, is a fixing of what has been corrupted and restoration to a past, ideal state of affairs. Compare that to our parasha, and the seven-times use of shev, to return:

And it shall come to pass, when all these things are come upon you ... and you shall call take them to heart, vi'hasheivota el li'vavekha... And you shall return, vi'shavta, unto the Lord thy

God, and shall obey his voice... Then the Lord you God will return, vi'shav, your captivity and have compassion upon you, and will return, vi'shav, and gather thee from all the nations...
(Devarim 30:1-3)

And you shall return, tashuv, and obey the voice of the Lord... for the Lord will again, yashuv, rejoice over you for good, as God rejoiced over thy fathers... if you turn, tashuv, unto the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul. (Devarim 30:8-10)

Here, the point of the suffering is that it brings about movement and change. After we have suffered, we take things to heart; we turn inside ourselves. This inner movement leads to outer movement, we return to God, which then results in reciprocal movement on God's part, God returns to us and returns our people to each other and their land. God and Israel have grown apart, but when Israel learns to change, they can begin to move towards each other once again. Our relationship is now defined by a dynamics of change and movement. Thus, even after we have drawn close, we will continue to draw even closer to God, and God will continue to draw even closer to us.

This is not about removing the bad and restoring things to the way they were. It is a returning that is not about reverting. It is a returning that is a turning in and a turning towards. By turning into ourselves, by turning towards God, we do not recapture the old. We create something new, something better: *"And God will do good to you, and multiply you above your fathers* (30:5).

What allows for one response in Bechukotai and a different response in Nitzavim? One answer might be simply circumstances: in one case the people confess but do not change, and in the other they are truly prepared to change. But it seems that there is another factor at play here, and that is how the relationship, the brit, is conceived. The brit, our covenant with God, demands that we fulfill all of the mitzvot. Inevitably, we will fall short, and we will transgress. Do such violations, especially in cases when they are willful and plentiful, constitute an abrogation of the brit?

The two parshiyot offer different answers. In Bechukotai, we are told at the very outset that the sins that bring about the Divine curses are an annulment of the brit (Vayikra 26:15). What saves us is that God remains committed to the covenant with the forefathers. And as to the covenant with us, God will keep it even when we have abandoned it (Vayikra 26:44). In contrast, in Ki Tavo, the enumeration of the Divine curses that lead up to Nitzavim, we hear of violating the commandments, but never of annulling the covenant (Devarim 28:15, 20, 45; the one exception is idolatry, and only from the perspective of others: 29:4). This difference is also reflected in the way these sections end. The section of curses in Bechukotai end with the line: *"These are the decrees, ordinances and teachings..."* (Vayikra 26:46). The parallel section in Ki Tavo ends with: *"These are the words of the covenant..."* (Devarim 28:69). In Bechukotai there is no brit, we have abandoned it. In Ki Tavo, even after sin, the brit remains.

The relationship with God after sin and after punishment is also radically different. Where the brit has been abandoned, God will save us for the brit with the forefathers, will remember the land, and will not fully abandon us, true (Vayikra 26:42). But the relationship remains a distant and chilly one, for God will neither redeem us nor restore us to the land (Vayikra 26:43-44). Where, however, the brit remains intact, then when we return to God, God will return to us, God reaffirms the living relationship with us. Thus, God will redeem us and return us to the land (Devarim 30:3).

So why does the brit survive in one case and fail in the other? The key question seems to be, to what degree our relationship is based on an idealized picture of perfection or based on reality with all its shortcomings. If God expects us to be perfect, or even if just we expect that from ourselves in our relationship with God, then when we slip from that ideal, we will have stepped out of the brit. Perfection is expected, and when it is not achieved, the black mark of failure always remains and can never be fully erased. We can confess our sins, we can accept our punishment for them. This will help somewhat; at least justice will be served and the past offense will be somewhat softened. But the fact of past violation will always remain, the brit will forever be damaged.

The alternative to this perfection-based, and backwards-looking approach is an approach that is imperfection-based and forwards-looking. It is an approach that accepts that we are imperfect, that we will make mistakes, that we can work to become better, but we don't necessarily start out there. This is an approach that can make peace with the past violations if they lead to future growth, if they can improve who we are, if they can bring about change. The brit actually can be

strengthened as a result, since this is a brit that is based on future possibility and not on the past failures.

What happened between Bechukotai and Nitzavim? Why did the nature of the brit change from one parasha to the next? It is worth remembering that Bechukotai was given at the foot of Mt. Sinai, at the beginning of their time in the Wilderness, whereas Nitzavim was given at the end of 40 years of sojourning. What happened in those 40 years was something profound. The Children of Israel showed over forty long years that they were prepared to stay committed to the covenant even in the face of failure and adversity. They were refused entry into the land and were fated to years and years of pointless wandering. Imagine how many times during those years a person would have been tempted to say: *"This is pointless! God hasn't given us what God promised! Let's just give up on this whole enterprise!"* Actually, someone did say that, namely Datan and Aviram (Bamidbar 16:13), but everyone else managed to hold onto the faith, to persevere even when it seemed like the relationship was over.

We showed that we were able to remain committed to the relationship even when it seemed doomed to failure, even when it was hard to see God's keeping up of God's end. If we are prepared to be committed to the relationship regardless of what may come, then so is God. It has become a relationship that transcends current realities and failures, that we remain committed to because we have faith in the other side, we have faith in the future.

Samuel Johnson once quipped that a second marriage was the triumph of hope over experience. When we recommit to a relationship, we are choosing to define the relationship by hope. We accept that there will be error, backsliding, transgression. But if we remain committed knowing this, then the relationship can survive. In so doing, we affirm our faith in the other person; we accept him or her knowing their shortcomings. And we affirm our faith in the future. We have faith that the relationship can continue to grow, and we have faith that we – both parties of the relationship – can continue to grow, grow individually and grow together.

As we enter into Rosh HaShanah, let us look back on our past transgressions, but do so for the purpose of looking forward. Let us not beat ourselves up because of a mistaken ideal of perfection. Let us rather ask ourselves what we have learned, how we can change. How we can continue to hold fast in our relationship to God, so that relationship continues to grow, so that we continue to draw closer to God just as God continues to draw closer to us.

Shabbat Shalom and Shanah Tovah!

<https://library.yct Torah.org/2012/09/the-triumph-of-hope-over-experience/>

And Moses Went...: Thoughts for Nitsavim/Vayelekh

By Rabbi Marc D. Angel *

"And Moses went and spoke these words unto all Israel" (Devarim 31:1).

The verse states that Moses went...but does not tell us where he went! Commentators have made various suggestions: Moses went to the tent of meeting; Moses went to each individual tribe; Moses went to the study hall.

An enigmatic interpretation has been suggested: Moses went into the souls of each Israelite. Poetically, the spirit of Moses — who is about to die — was to live on eternally in the hearts and minds of all Israel for all time. Moses went...and continues forever to speak his words unto all Israel.

How would this work?

One of the famous songs of Simon and Garfunkel is *"The Sound of Silence."* This is an intriguing phrase, since by definition silence has no sound. But perhaps the phrase suggests something profound: there are sounds we don't hear with our ears, but that are deep within us "in the wells of silence."

The great composer, Beethoven, was completely deaf at the age of forty, and yet this is when he wrote his famous Symphony No. 9. He could not hear the sounds of the music he composed with his ears, but he was able to "hear" the

entire symphony as he composed it while deaf. There is an inner music, very real and very powerful, that can exist within the mind even if the ears do not hear it.

When we ponder that Moses's words entered the souls of each Israelite, we think of the sound of silence, the inner music within each of us that is unheard externally. If we listen carefully enough, the words of Moses echo deep within us.

This week's Torah reading occurs just before Rosh Hashana and the Ten Days of Repentance. The Hebrew word for repentance — teshuvah — means return or answer. We are called upon to listen to the sound of silence within us, the ongoing voice of Moses; we are urged to return to our spiritual roots.

Moses came and went; and he continues to ask us and to prod us. Do we hear his voice? Are we ready to answer?

* Founder and Director, Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals.

The Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals has experienced a significant drop in donations during the pandemic. The Institute needs our help to maintain and strengthen our Institute. Each gift, large or small, is a vote for an intellectually vibrant, compassionate, inclusive Orthodox Judaism. You may contribute on our website jewishideas.org or you may send your check to Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals, 2 West 70th Street, New York, NY 10023. Ed.: Please join me in helping the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals at this time.

<https://www.jewishideas.org/node/3154>

If Religions Were Stress-Tested Like Banks

By Rabbi Aryeh Klapper *

My high school rebbeim often expressed their preference for what they described as the time-tested religion of Eastern Europe over what they saw as my Johnny-come-lately Modern Orthodoxy. I responded that their belief structure had crumbled on meeting the Enlightenment, going from nearly 100 percent affiliation to under 10 percent in the blink of an historical eye; why revive a Judaism that had failed so dramatically, and that if revived, would inevitably fail again?

We were all being reductionist. No part of the American Orthodox experience parallels or recreates that of Eastern Europe, and even the most robust ideologies will fail sociologically at some point. But despite our polemical disagreements, we implicitly shared the neo-Darwinian notion that sustainability is evidence of authenticity and desirability, whereas unsustainability is evidence that a position may not deserve to thrive even briefly.

I wonder if that is necessarily so. There have been brief beautiful efflorescences in Jewish history that reverberate centuries later, after a long hiatus, even though their communal half-life was evanescent. Who championed Rabbi Menahem HaMeiri's attitude toward Christians in the centuries after his death? Is mussar worthless because it flickered out so rapidly as a social movement?

Nonetheless, I will be deeply disappointed if Modern Orthodoxy turns out to be a shooting star. I want my descendants and grandstudents to live in a community of sincere ovdei Hashem (servants of God), who regard all human beings as unequivocally created beTzelem Elokim (in God's Image), value women's and men's Talmud Torah at the highest level, and regard knowledge of all truths as religiously valuable, a constellation of values whose possibility seems to depend on Modern Orthodoxy, with all its flaws. So I care very much about sustainability, and therefore about responsible stewardship.

One modern technique of responsible stewardship is the "stress test." This technique forces leaders to consider the effects of undesirable and even unjust possibilities they might otherwise ignore. Can religious ideologies be stress-tested?

Stress tests originated as a way of testing cardiac health in human beings. Doctors have people gradually raise their exertion level, for example, by running on a treadmill, and see whether the trendlines are dangerous. The goal is to enable

diagnosis and advance treatment of conditions that don't manifest under ordinary circumstances, and thus to extend the lives of specific human beings.

"Stress test" became a metaphor applied to banks during the 2008 financial crisis. Like all metaphors, the fit is imperfect. Bank stress tests are pure simulations — imagine if interest rates rose X basis points in Y quarters — and the goal is systemic stability rather than the survival of the specific bank. A diagnosis of weakness often leads to regulator-assisted suicide rather than treatment.

There are at least two arguments against extending the metaphor to religious ideologies. First, there are no conceivable mathematical formulas we can use to run the simulation; it will be almost entirely intuition and speculation. Second, true beliefs should be maintained regardless of their social success or failure. Torah and halakha are binding on Jews because God said so, even if the vast majority of us no longer feel bound.

Nonetheless, I think the experiment is worthwhile, for three reasons. First, we may discover that not all of our apparently core tenets are held absolutely rather than pragmatically. Second, the question of priorities in education is legitimate even among absolutely true propositions. Finally, there is a difference between beliefs and ideology. An ideology aims at influence and not just at truth, and so if it fails to influence, it may not be the right framework for presenting our eternal truths in this time and place.

So what would strain Modern Orthodoxy's resources intellectually and socially, and what are the risks we need to be preparing for? What could we learn, and what would our overall purpose be? I want to play out one example, but I encourage you to adopt the exercise for your own concerns.

Successful ideologies tend to be good for their adherents and also give them a sense that they are doing good for their community. Modern Orthodoxy took justified pride in its adherents' twentieth-century contributions to America, which we plausibly saw as disproportionate to our share of the population. We reasonably thought that it was to everyone's advantage if we also received a disproportionate share of certain goods, especially education, since we were using those resources to grow the pie for everyone.

That is now being challenged, and not on socialist but on equity grounds. The claim against us is that we allowed the enlarged pie to be divided unfairly, and we benefited from that unfair division. There is also a practical claim that regardless of past productivity, there is no reason to believe that going forward, Jews will do more to grow the pie than others granted the same resources. These arguments are made specifically with regard to elite university admissions.

Remember that for the purpose of this exercise, it is irrelevant whether these claims are true or false or specious. All that matters is how our ideological community would be affected by their widespread acceptance, and how we can best prepare to withstand those effects if we cannot prevent them. A stress test does not ask whether depositors should be withdrawing their money, only what will happen if they do.

One question this raises is whether we have invested too much of our stock and sense of self in the Ivies. Our community initially prospered by bringing high academic seriousness to public institutions such as City College. That success made it possible for subsequent generations to thrive in an academically meritocratic competition for seats in elite institutions — and this in turn made our community less focused on expanding educational opportunity for everyone, even as the elite institutions began accepting much lower percentages of qualified applicants.

This is an error and a wrong on our part. It is an error, because our teenagers — and everyone else's teenagers — should not have their self-esteem or their prospects depend on an arbitrary process, let alone one in which their chances may be artificially lowered. It is a wrong, because there is no reason to tolerate the artificial scarcity that enables this arbitrary process.

It is also a significant risk. For instance, some of our leading high schools recruit based on Ivy admissions rates; as those rates decline, those schools may suffer. Anecdotally, this is already happening.

Our remarkable college admission record resulted from and contributed to a virtuous cycle of academic and economic

success. The effort to redistribute admissions, which is unabashedly an attempt at long-term economic redistribution (although, as with the educational policy, that redistribution may take place solely among the elite), therefore also raises the specter of a sustained communal economic recession.

As responsible stewards, we therefore need to ask: What would happen religiously if our children cannot, no matter how hard they work, attain our economic level? Which aspects of our institutions are luxuries that can be given up without affecting attendance, investment, and so forth, and which are bone rather than fat? To what extent has our ideology been connected to a “success gospel” that cannot hold hearts and minds in a time of economic stasis?

An ideologically ironic consequence of our community’s economic and educational success has been the capacity to self-ghettoize, in Teaneck, the Five Towns, and so forth. This creates a problematic cycle in which the presence of a Modern Orthodox community raises prices, so that it becomes harder for anyone not wealthy to be geographically part of that community. This is aside from the financial and educational entry barriers to our educational institutions, some of which stem from their intended role as pipelines to the Ivies.

I can imagine a wide variety of practical hedges against these concerns. For example, we could encourage aliya — although to make an economic difference, this cannot be aliya to transplanted American suburbs on jobs paying American salaries. We could push hard to make more state universities superb and affordable. We could — I know that the Orthodox Union is trying — seed communities where real estate is cheaper and hope it stays that way for a while. We could push for the relaxation of zoning laws and/or environmental-impact requirements that prevent affordable housing from being built in sufficient quantities where we currently live. But my question is whether, over and above all these, there is Torah we can and should teach that would help prevent an economic standstill from generating a religious recession.

Here is one question that may encapsulate the issue. How does a naturally idealistic Modern Orthodox teenager currently react to our community? Surely there are many wonderful and attractive things about us, and just as surely, we are flawed. We need to consider how changing circumstances might highlight those flaws to our own children, especially if those circumstances diminish the practical advantages we can offer them. Most of all, we need to plan carefully during this time of prosperity to insure against even a rumor of insufficient moral and ethical resources to meet our children’s religious demands.

* Dean of the Center for Modern Torah Leadership (CMTL), which brings traditional rigor, interdisciplinary openness, and a deeply humanist understanding of halakha to every aspect of Jewish and public life. This article appears in issue 42 of *Conversations*, the journal of the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals.

<https://www.jewishideas.org/node/3153>

Hakhel -- Teach Torah: Even to the infant

By Rabbi Mordechai Rhine *

Although Torah study is something that happens every day, the grand experience of Hakhel was once in seven years. Hakhel was an awesome gathering of the entire Jewish people which took place on Succos of the year following Shemita (the sabbatical year). A great platform was built from which the king read large sections of Torah creating an unforgettable event. “*Gather the people,*” the Torah instructs us, “*The men, the women, and the children...*”

The Ozneyim LaTorah commentary points out that the Hebrew word used in this verse for children is “*Taf*,” which includes even nursing children. (See Rashi in Parshas Korach 16:27.) This prompts the question, “What is the point of bringing such young children if they won’t learn anything anyway?”

Rav Moshe Feinstein (Kol Rom) explains that people might think that it is only worth teaching children Torah if they will remember it and excel in its observance. Regarding a less successful child, a parent might wonder if his efforts are really worth it. The imagery of bringing nursing children to Hakhel is powerful. The experience of Torah is valuable in and of itself, even if the child does not gain anything academically. The human being learns and experiences on many levels beyond the intellect. Those other aspects of the student are gaining even when pure academic success is not evident.

Interestingly the Talmud teaches us that Rabbi Yehoshua's mother would take his crib to the Beis Medrash so that even as an infant he should absorb Torah. Years later Rabbi Yehoshua would express admiration for the teaching that young children should be brought to Hakhel (Chagiga 3). Perhaps his enormous joy in this teaching was because he himself benefitted from this perspective of being in the environment of Torah even when he was at an age that he could not yet understand what was being taught.

The Talmud, in describing dedication to Jewish education even when the student is a slow learner, cites the example of Rebbe Pireida who had a certain student who needed to hear the material (a proverbial) 400 times before he would understand it. Although it must have been taxing on him, Rebbe Pireida did so.

Perhaps this is why the mitzva of teaching Torah is expressed in Shema as "*Vishinantem*," with a root word of Shin-Nun. Shin-Nun spells "*Shein*," meaning tooth. Our Rabbis teach that the goal in teaching Torah is that it should be sharp and precise in the student. Another possible approach to this root word is that it is related to the word "*Lishanoso*," which also has a Shin-Nun root, and means "*to repeat it*." (See Megilla 4) Sometimes we are fortunate to have students who will acquire Torah with sharpness and precision. But sometimes we will have students who just need the material repeated again and again. In that case, that is the Torah's obligation. The imagery of a child at Hakhel reminds us that even if a child doesn't understand the material, the environment of Torah and the study of Torah is still precious and valued.

Torah is the glue that connects us to Hashem. It is Hashem's love note to us, to guide us to connect with Him and for moral living. Torah is the inheritance of every Jew.

With best wishes for a wonderful Shabbos!

* Rabbi Mordechai Rhine is a certified mediator and coach with Rabbinic experience of more than 20 years. Based in Maryland, he provides services internationally via Zoom. He is the Director of TEACH613: Building Torah Communities, One family at a Time, and the founder of CARE Mediation, focused on Marriage/ Shalom Bayis and personal coaching. To reach Rabbi Rhine, his websites are www.care-mediation.com and www.teach613.org; his email is RMRhine@gmail.com. **For information or to join any Torah613 classes, contact Rabbi Rhine.**

Parshas Netzavim-Vayeilech by Rabbi Yehoshua Singer * © 2020

As we prepare for the High Holidays this year under the strain of physical separation, we seek ways to find some level of meaningful connection. The High Holidays, immediately followed by Sukkos, is a time when we are usually making arrangements for sharing and celebrating with family and friends. The void this year, as some wonder if and how they can even participate in services, is one that we all feel and seek to fill.

In Moshe's opening words in this week's parsha, the Medrash finds a message which indicates that these connections are even more important than we may realize. Engaging in efforts to connect and join together at this time can not only alleviate our struggle but may even be a powerful merit for the coming year.

The parsha opens with the words "*You are standing here today, all of you*" (Devarim 29:9). The Medrash Yalkut Shimoni (980) explains that these words are meant as two phrases, with the second explaining the first. "*You are standing here today*." When is this true? "*All of you*" - when you are bound together as one. The Medrash gives a parable to explain. When a bundle of reeds is taken as one, the bundle is difficult to break. If one reed is taken by itself, even a baby can break it. The Medrash is telling us that the merit which will determine whether we stand or fall as a nation is the merit of being bound together as one. As we seek ways to connect, we must realize that whatever level of connection we achieve is itself of great significance.

Yet as we think back to previous years, it may seem that our struggle to connect did not begin with the recent pandemic. As we were fully joining and enjoying live human company last year, did we truly enjoy every person we saw? Did we truly

seek to be bound with everyone else in the community? Perhaps there may have been some whom we took for granted, offering a short nod or a handshake and moving on, barely noticing each other. If we are to seek the merit of being bound together, we must ask ourselves what does it mean to be bound together, and how do we develop a connection of that depth? I believe it is this question which the Medrash is addressing with the parable of the reeds. The reeds lean on each other and thereby combine the strength of every small reed together into one collective force. The collective force enables the reeds to withstand far greater pressures than any reed can withstand alone.

The Medrash is telling us to apply this concept to our human connections. If we want to withstand the test of time and remain standing firm as G-d's nation, we must learn to lean on each other and combine our individual strengths and merits into one collective force. We must recognize that though each reed may seem insignificant, each of us alone is also insignificant. It is only when we bind together that our collective merit can protect us. No one is so great that they can stand alone, and no one is too small to add to the whole.

The Medrash continues this message with the second half of the passuk. Moshe lists those standing today and says *"the heads of your tribes, your elders and your officers, every Jewish individual."* The Medrash explains that this too is meant to be understood as two phrases. Although, G-d has appointed for us *"the heads of your tribes, your elders and your officers,"* we are still all of equal merit before G-d *"every Jewish individual."* We each have our own role and purpose in G-d's world, and each role is equally cherished by G-d.

As we seek to connect, the Medrash is teaching us to focus on the unique role and strength that each individual has. Everyone has their place in the whole, and everyone's place is important to G-d. After these last several months it is easy to look past our own strengths and realize how much we need each other. As we focus on that need, we can appreciate the role of every individual and how everyone has their own unique strengths. The more we appreciate each other, the more we can learn from each other and compromise to work together as G-d's nation, the greater our merit will be for this coming year. May it be a year of blessing.

* Savannah Kollel; Congregation B'Brith Jacob, Savannah, GA. Until recently, Rabbi, Am HaTorah Congregation, Bethesda, MD. Rabbi Singer will become Rosh Kollel next year. I have slightly adapted his Dvar Torah from 2020 to reflect his absence by distance now rather than distance because of the pandemic in 2020.

Shoftim: Judges and Halacha for Each Generation

By Rabbi Haim Ovadia *

[Rabbi Ovadia did not submit a Dvar Torah on Nitzavim Vayeilech. Watch this space for more of his insights in 5784.]

* Torah VeAhava. Rabbi, Beth Sholom Sephardic Minyan (Potomac, MD) and faculty member, AJRCA non-denominational rabbinical school. **New: Many of Rabbi Ovadia's Devrei Torah are now available on Sefaria:** <https://www.sefaria.org/profile/haim-ovadia?tab=sheets> . The Sefaria articles usually include Hebrew text, which I must delete because of issues changing software formats.

Shavuon Nitzavim Vayeilech

by Rabbi Moshe Rube*

The best shofar blowers I've known have not been Jewish. My music professor played trumpet, and he could play Bach on the shofar. One of the students from a visiting NZ school was a trumpet player. When I gave him the shofar to blow, he hit all kinds of notes, far surpassing the usual long blow we usually hear.

Perhaps that experience is appropriate, because Rosh Hashanah is a universal holiday. We celebrate proclaiming God as king of the whole world, and the Temple as a House of Prayer for all the nations. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks pointed this out and said that other holidays, such as Passover, emphasise Jewish particularism. In contrast, Rosh Hashanah and Yom

Kippur emphasise our relationship with all nations and cultures around the world.

To paraphrase the words of Moses from our portion, *“All of us in the world stand today before God.”* We are all on the same team and need to work together. After all, we live on the same planet, and it's so much more fun to learn from each other than to fight. If nothing else, let's hope and pray that more Jews get inspired from the world around them and take up the trumpet.

Shabbat Shalom and Shanah Tovah,
Rabbi Rube

* Senior Rabbi of Auckland Hebrew Congregation, Remuera)Auckland(, New Zealand. Formerly Rabbi, Congregation Knesseth Israel)Birmingham, AL(.

Special note: The Auckland Holocaust Memorial Trust, chaired by Bob Narev, is initiating work on a Holocaust Memorial Garden near the Auckland Hebrew Congregation to create a beautiful Memorial and place for reflection. The design will incorporate more than 200 cobblestones from the Warsaw Ghetto that Auckland War Memorial Museum obtained as a gift to the Jewish community from the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, DC. The Trust will also move and reinstall the Holocaust Memorial sculpture completed in 1993 for the Greys Avenue site)former location of the Orthodox congregation(. After Yom Tov, the Trust will reach out to families who have a close connection to the Holocaust to discuss a legacy project that will memorialise those who lost their lives for generations to come.

Rav Kook Torah Nitzavim: Bridging the Generation Gap

The time will come, the Torah assures us, when God will bring the Jewish people back to the land of their ancestors. In the Land of Israel, they will learn to fully love God and keep His commandments:

“God will remove the barriers from your hearts and from your descendants’ hearts, so that you will love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul... .”)Deut. 30:6(

Why does the verse mention both “your hearts” and “your descendants’ hearts”? Do the parents and children have different hearts?

In fact, their hearts are different. Each generation has its own intellectual, emotional, and spiritual yearnings. Each generation has its own hurdles and barriers to be overcome. While the fundamental content of the Torah does not change — it is still the same divine Torah from Sinai — its style and exposition must meet the needs of the day.

The prophet Elijah, harbinger of the redemption, will know how to reach out to each generation in its own language. He will succeed in bringing them together, and thus fulfill his mission to *“restore the heart of fathers to the children, and the heart of the children to their fathers”*)Malachi 3:24(.

Torah for Our Time

Rav Kook was profoundly disturbed by the widespread abandonment of religious observance by the young people of his time. He frequently pleaded for the creation of a renascent literature to reach out to the younger generation. In a letter from 1913, for example, he wrote:

“We must translate our entire sacred treasury according to the contemporary style of writing. Almost the entire body of Jewish knowledge and sentiments must be made accessible to the people of our time.”

In the days of the return from Babylonian exile, Ezra switched the script of the Torah from the paleo-Hebrew characters to the letters that we use today, the more aesthetically pleasing Assyrian script)Sanhedrin 21b(. One reason for doing so

was in order to help his generation appreciate and connect to the Torah. We live in a similar age, when the exiled Jews returning to their homeland are often detached from their spiritual heritage. Ezra's initiative is an apt metaphor for the current need to present the Torah in a language and style suitable for our time, while preserving its inner content.

)*Gold from the Land of Israel* pp. 342-343. Adapted from *Otzarot HaRe'iyah* vol. II, p. 369; *Igrot HaRe'iyah* vol. II, p. 226.(

<https://ravkooktorah.org/NITZAV63.htm>

Nitzavim: Defeating Death)5774, 5781(

By Lord Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, z"l, Former Chief Rabbi of the U.K.*

Only now, reaching Nitzavim, can we begin to get a sense of the vast, world-changing project at the heart of the Divine-human encounter that took place in the lifetime of Moses and the birth of Jews/ Israel as a nation.

To understand it, recall the famous remark of Sherlock Holmes. "I draw your attention," he said to Dr Watson, "to the curious incident of the dog at night." "But the dog did nothing at night," said Watson. "That," said Holmes, "is the curious incident."]1[Sometimes to know what a book is about you need to focus on what it does not say, not just on what it does.

What is missing from the Torah, almost inexplicably so given the background against which it is set, is a fixation with death. The ancient Egyptians were obsessed with death. Their monumental buildings were an attempt to defy death. The pyramids were giant mausoleums. More precisely, they were portals through which the soul of a deceased pharaoh could ascend to heaven and join the immortals. The most famous Egyptian text that has come down to us is *The Book of the Dead*. Only the afterlife is real: life is a preparation for death.

There is nothing of this in the Torah, at least not explicitly. Jews believed in Olam HaBa, the World to Come, life after death. They believed in *tehiyat hametim*, the resurrection of the dead.]2[There are six references to it in the second paragraph of the Amidah alone. But not only are these ideas almost completely absent from Tanach. They are absent at the very points where we would expect them.

The book of *Kohelet*)Ecclesiastes(is an extended lament at human mortality. Havel havalim... hakol havel: Everything is worthless because life is a mere fleeting breath)Ecc 1:2(. Why did the author of Ecclesiastes not mention the World to Come and life-after-death? Another example: the book of Job is a sustained protest against the apparent injustice of the world. Why did no one answer Job to say, "You and other innocent people who suffer will be rewarded in the afterlife"? We believe in the afterlife. Why then is it not mentioned – merely hinted at – in the Torah? That is the curious incident.

The simple answer is that obsession with death ultimately devalues life. Why fight against the evils and injustices of the world if this life is only a preparation for the world to come? Ernest Becker in his classic *The Denial of Death* argues that fear of our own mortality has been one of the driving forces of civilisation.]3[It is what led the ancient world to enslave the masses, turning them into giant labour forces to build monumental buildings that would stand as long as time itself. It led to the ancient cult of the hero, the man who becomes immortal by doing daring deeds on the field of battle. We fear death; we have a love-hate relationship with it. Freud called this *thanatos*, the death instinct, and said it was one of the two driving forces of life, the other being *eros*.

Judaism is a sustained protest against this world-view. That is why "*No one knows where Moses is buried*")Deut. 34:6(so that his tomb should never become a place of pilgrimage and worship. That is why in place of a pyramid or a temple such as Ramses II built at Abu Simbel, all the Israelites had for almost five centuries until the days of Solomon was the Mishkan, a portable Sanctuary, more like a tent than a temple. That is why, in Judaism, death defiles and why the rite of the Red Heifer was necessary to purify people from contact with it. That is why the holier you are – if you are a Kohen, more so if you are the High Priest – the less you can be in contact or under the same roof as a dead person. God is not in death but in life.

Only against this Egyptian background can we fully sense the drama behind words that have become so familiar to us that we are no longer surprised by them, the great words in which Moses frames the choice for all time:

See, I have set before you today life and good, death and evil ... I call heaven and earth as witnesses today against you, that I have set before you life and death, the blessing and the curse; therefore choose life, that you and your children may live. Deut. 30:15, 30:19

Life is good, death is bad. Life is a blessing, death is a curse. These are truisms for us. Why even mention them? Because they were not common ideas in the ancient world. They were revolutionary. They still are.

How then do you defeat death? Yes there is an afterlife. Yes there is *tehiyat hametim*, resurrection. But Moses does not focus on these obvious ideas. He tells us something different altogether. You achieve immortality by being part of a covenant – a covenant with eternity itself, that is to say, a covenant with God.

When you live your life within a covenant, something extraordinary happens. Your parents and grandparents live on in you. You live on in your children and grandchildren. They are part of your life. You are part of theirs. That is what Moses meant when he said, near the beginning of this week's parsha:

It is not with you alone that I am making this covenant and oath, but with whoever stands with us here today before the Lord our God as well as those not with us here today. Deut. 29:13-14

In Moses' day that last phrase meant "*your children not yet born.*" He did not need to include "*your parents, no longer alive*" because their parents had themselves made a covenant with God forty years before at Mount Sinai. But what Moses meant in a larger sense is that when we renew the covenant, when we dedicate our lives to the faith and way of life of our ancestors, they become immortal in us, as we become immortal in our children.

It is precisely because Judaism focuses on this world, not the next, that it is the most child-centered of all the great religions. They are our immortality. That is what Rachel meant when she said, "*Give me children, or else I am like one dead*" (Gen. 30:1). It is what Abraham meant when he said, "*Lord, God, what will you give me if I remain childless?*" (Gen. 15:2). We are not all destined to have children. The Rabbis said that the good we do constitutes our *toldot*, our posterity. But by honouring the memory of our parents and bringing up children to continue the Jewish story we achieve the one form of immortality that lies this side of the grave, in this world that God pronounced good.

Now consider the two last commands in the Torah, set out in parshat Vayelech, the ones Moses gave at the very end of his life. One is *hakhel*, the command that the King summon the nation to an assembly every seven years:

At the end of every seven years ... Assemble the people – men, women and children, and the stranger living in your towns – so that they can listen and learn to fear the Lord your God and follow carefully all the words of this law. Deut. 31:12

The meaning of this command is simple. Moses is saying: It is not enough that your parents made a covenant with God at Mount Sinai or that you yourselves renewed it with me here on the plains of Moab. The covenant must be perpetually renewed, every seven years, so that it never becomes history. It always remains memory. It never becomes old because every seven years it becomes new again.

And the last command?

"Now write down this song and teach it to the Israelites and make them sing it, so that it may be a witness for me against them." Deut. 31:19

This, according to tradition, is the command to write [at least part of] a *Sefer Torah*. As Maimonides puts it: "*Even if your ancestors have left you a Sefer Torah, nonetheless you are commanded to write one for yourself.*"⁴

What is Moses saying in this, his last charge to the people he had led for forty years, was: It is not sufficient to say, our ancestors received the Torah from Moses, or from God. You have to take it and make it new in every generation. You must make the Torah not just your parents' or grandparents' faith but your own. If you write it, it will write you. The eternal word of the eternal God is your share in eternity.

We now sense the full force of the drama of these last days of Moses' life. Moses knew he was about to die, knew he would not cross the Jordan and enter the land he had spent his entire life leading the people toward. Moses, confronting his own mortality, asks us in every generation to confront ours.

Our faith – Moses is telling us – is not like that of the Egyptians, the Greeks, the Romans, or virtually every other civilisation known to history. We do not find God in a realm beyond life – in heaven, or after death, in mystic disengagement from the world or in philosophical contemplation. We find God in life. We find God in the key words of Devarim(love and joy. To find God, he says in this week's parsha, you don't have to climb to heaven or cross the sea)Deut. 30:12-13(. God is here. God is now. God is life.

And that life, though it will end one day, in truth does not end. For if you keep the covenant, then your ancestors will live in you, and you will live on in your children)or your disciples or the recipients of your kindness(. Every seven years the covenant will become new again. Every generation will write its own Sefer Torah. The gate to eternity is not death: it is life lived in a covenant endlessly renewed, in words engraved on our hearts and the hearts of our children.

And so Moses, the greatest leader we ever had, became immortal. Not by living forever. Not by building a tomb and temple to his glory. We don't even know where he is buried. The only physical structure he left us was portable because life itself is a journey. He didn't even become immortal the way Aaron did, by seeing his children become his successors. He became immortal by making us his disciples. And in one of their first recorded utterances, the Rabbis said likewise: Raise up many disciples.

To be a leader, you don't need a crown or robes of office. All you need to do is to write your chapter in the story, do deeds that heal some of the pain of this world, and act so that others become a little better for having known you. Live so that through you our ancient covenant with God is renewed in the only way that matters: in life. Moses' last testament to us at the very end of his days, when his mind might so easily have turned to death, was: Choose life.

FOOTNOTES:

]1[Arthur Conan Doyle, "The Adventure of Silver Blaze."

]2[The Mishnah in Sanhedrin 10:1 says that believing that the resurrection of the dead is stated in the Torah is a fundamental part of Jewish faith. However, according to any interpretation, the statement is implicit, not explicit.

]3[New York: Free Press, 1973.

]4[*Mishneh Torah*, Hilchot Tefillin, Mezuzah, VeSefer Torah 7:1.

<https://www.rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation/nitzavim/defeating-death/>

Note: because Likutei Torah and the Internet Parsha Sheet, both attached by E-mail, normally include the two most recent Devrei Torah by Rabbi Sacks, I have selected an earlier Dvar.

"Clean Up and Carry On!"
By Yossy Goldman * © Chabad 2023

Is living life as a committed Jew difficult? Is the Torah burdensome and onerous?

Let's see what this week's parshah has to say about it.

For this commandment which I command you this day is not concealed from you, nor is it far away. It is not in heaven that you should say "Who will go up to heaven for us and fetch it" ... nor is it beyond the sea that you should say "Who will cross to the other side of the sea for us" ...

*rather, this thing is very close to you ... so that you can fulfill it.*¹

These words state clearly that living by the Torah's precepts is not a distant ideal or impossible dream. It's in reach, practical, and eminently doable.

These verses form the foundation of the *Book of Tanya*, the creed of Chabad Chassidism. The final verse, Ki karov elecha hadavar me'od, "*this thing is very close to you*," even appears on its title page.

Tanya's illustrious author, Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi, known as the Alter Rebbe, writes that his entire purpose of writing the Tanya was to demonstrate that living a deeply committed Jewish life is neither impossible nor unattainable. "*It is close to you*" means that it is realistically achievable and within reach of "*the average person*," whom the Tanya addresses.

I frequently hear from Jews today that living a Torah-observant life is difficult, if not downright impossible.

The Alter Rebbe begs to differ.

Throughout the Tanya, he explains that we all have a G dly soul and an animalistic soul, and that there is meant to be an ongoing struggle between these forces inside us as each aspires to reign supreme and be the only one to direct our choices and actions.

Tanya is called *Sefer Shel Beinonim*, the "*Book of the Intermediate*," mapping out the spiritual struggle of the average person. And the author encourages us by reminding us that we are not necessarily all expected to be tzaddikim — otherworldly, righteous individuals. Very gently, he reminds us that even if we are not perfect, G d loves us.

He describes the different types of people, each in their own spiritual category. Some may be perfectly righteous, and others less. Some are perpetually inspired, while others may struggle with their faith and commitment. Some may even experience falls from grace, and the Alter Rebbe encourages those who do falter that all is not lost. Even if it happens repeatedly, it is still not the end of the world, he reassures us.

In fact, for most of us it will be a lifelong struggle. And that's OK, he says. Because just as G d loves the perfect tzaddik, the wholly righteous person who never steps out of line and keeps to the straight and narrow throughout his or her life, so does He love those of us who struggle and have repeated spiritual ups and downs, falls and failings.

I love his illustration using two types of food: sweet and spicy.² Some people love sweet food, and some like it hot. The wholly righteous person is like sweet food, while the one who has ups and downs resembles spicy food. Some people love a sweet kugel on Shabbat, while others prefer a savory noodle kugel. G d likes both, meaning that while He obviously values the sweet, righteous person, He has special appreciation for those who struggle and may have turbulent fluctuations in their service of G d.

The main thing is that when we do fall, we pick ourselves up and start again without becoming resigned or allowing ourselves to wallow in self-pity.

I am reminded of the old Yiddish story that is pertinent at this time of year. On Erev Yom Kippur there is a long-standing tradition to observe kaparot and, to this day, many still do it in the same old-fashioned way with a real live chicken. From time to time it happens that as the chicken is being passed overhead, it duly soils the poor fellow below.

So what does he do? Well, besides grimacing and bemoaning his fate, the traditional Yiddish answer was, M'visht op, un m'geit weiter, "You clean yourself up, and you carry on."

It's a crass but stark reminder that even if we experience a fall, or a disappointment, we must still carry on and continue to do what we have to do, regardless.

What an encouraging idea!

How reassuring it is to know that no matter if or how many times we falter, we can always pick ourselves up again and continue with our life's mission. There are countless catch phrases out there about success and failure. Who the actual authors are is up for much debate. Some say, "Every failure is a rehearsal for success." Others suggest that "Success is the ability to go from one failure to another with no loss of enthusiasm." The one that I think best captures the Tanya's approach is this: "Success is not final; failure is not fatal: it is the courage to continue that counts."

Please G-d, the strugglers and stragglers will be inspired to continue their good work and give you nachas. We may not all be tzaddikim, but we can all give G-d much satisfaction, pleasure, and joy, each in our own way.

FOOTNOTES:

1. Deuteronomy 30:11-14.

2. Tanya, Chapter 27.

* Founding Director of the first Chabad House in South Africa; now Life Rabbi Emeritus of the Sydenham Shul in Johannesburg.

https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/5651294/jewish/Clean-Up-and-Carry-On.htm

Netzavim-Vayeilech: It's Easier Than You Think!

by Rabbi Moshe Wisniefsky *

It's Easier Than You Think!

For this thing is very close to you, in your mouth and in your heart, so you can fulfill it.)Deut. 30:14(

The "thing" referred to in this verse is the Torah in general)Rashi(and the directive to return to G-d in particular)Ramban(. G-d assures us that we always possess the inner capability to lead full, consummate lives, no matter how far we are, physically or spiritually, from where we should be. It is only a matter of exercising our free choice to do so.

When inspired by an inner drive to return to G-d and cling to Him, studying the Torah and observing G-d's commandments become natural and accessible.

Returning to G-d, after all, is returning to our authentic, innermost selves. When we allow our inner essence to shine, the interference from conflicting drives and façades that we so often convince ourselves that we must maintain disappears. Our direction becomes clear, and we become surprised by the power we suddenly possess to improve our behavior, to inspire others, and to affect the world.

— from *Daily Wisdom 3*

With wishes for blessed and sweet new year
Gut Shabbos,
Rabbi Yosef B. Friedman
Kehot Publication Society

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Volume 29, Issue 45

Shabbat Parashat Nitzavim - Vayelech

5783 B”H

Covenant and Conversation

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, z”l

Torah as Song

Moses’ long and tempestuous career is about to end. With words of blessing and encouragement he hands on the mantle of leadership to his successor Joshua, saying “I am a hundred and twenty years old now, and I may no longer be able to enter and to leave, since the Lord has told me, ‘You shall not cross this Jordan.’” (Deut. 31:2)

As Rashi notes, it is written, “shall not”, although Moses is still physically capable. He is still in full bodily vigour, “his eyes had not grown dim, nor his vitality fled.” (Deut. 34:7) But he has reached the end of his personal road. The time had come for another age, a new generation, and a different kind of leader.

But before he takes his leave of life, God has one last command for him, and through him, for the future.

“So now write down this Song and teach it to the Children of Israel. Place it in their mouths, that this Song may be My witness against them.”

Deut. 31:19

The plain sense of the verse is that God was commanding Moses and Joshua to write out the song that follows, that of Ha’azinu (Deut. 32:1-43). So Rashi and Nahmanides understand it. But the Oral Tradition read it differently. According to the Sages, “So now write down this Song” applies to the Torah as a whole. Thus the last of all the 613 commands is to write – or at least take part in writing, if only a single letter – a Torah scroll. Here is Maimonides’ statement of the law:

Every Israelite is commanded to write a Torah scroll for himself, as it says, “Now therefore write this song,” meaning, “Write for yourselves [a complete copy of] the Torah that contains this song,” since we do not write isolated passages of the Torah [but only a complete scroll]. Even if one has inherited a Torah scroll from his parents, nonetheless it is a mitzvah to write one for oneself, and one who does so is as if he had received [the Torah] from Mount Sinai. One who does not know how to write a scroll may engage [a scribe] to do it for him, and whoever corrects even one letter is as if he has written a whole scroll.[1]

Why this command? Why then, at the end of Moses’ life? Why make it the last of all the commands? And if the reference is to the Torah as a whole, why call it a “song”?

The Oral Tradition is here hinting at a set of very deep ideas. First, it is telling the Israelites, and us in every generation, that it is not enough to say, “We received the Torah from Moses,” or “from our parents.” We have to take the Torah and make it new in every generation. We have to write our own scroll. The point about the Torah is not that it is old but that it is new; it is not just about the past but about the future. It is not simply some ancient document that comes from an earlier era in the evolution of society. It speaks to us, here, now – but not without our making the effort to write it again.

There are two Hebrew words for an inheritance: *nachalah* and *yerushah*/ *morashah*. They convey different ideas. *Nachalah* is related to the word *nachal*, meaning a river, a stream. As water flows downhill, so an inheritance flows down the generations. It happens naturally. It needs no effort on our part.

A *yerushah* / *morashah* is different. Here the verb is active. It means to take possession of something by a positive deed or effort. The Israelites received the land as a result of God’s promise to Abraham. It was their legacy, their *nachalah*, but they nonetheless had to fight battles and win wars. Lehavdil, Mozart and Beethoven were both born to musical fathers. Music was in their genes, but their art was the result of almost endless hard work. Torah is a *morashah*, not a *nachalah*. We need to write it for ourselves, not merely inherit it from our ancestors.

And why call the Torah a Song? Because if we are to hand on our faith and way of life to the next generation, it must sing. Torah must be affective, not just cognitive. It must speak to our emotions. As Antonio Damasio showed empirically in *Descartes’ Error*[2], though the reasoning part of the brain is central to what makes us human, it is the limbic system, the seat of the emotions, that leads us to choose this way, not that. If our Torah lacks passion, we will not succeed in passing it on to the future. Music is the affective dimension of communication, the medium through which we express, evoke, and share emotion. Precisely because we are creatures of emotion, music is an essential part of the vocabulary of humankind.

Music has a close association with spirituality. As Rainer Maria Rilke put it:

Words still go softly out towards the unsayable.

And music always new, from palpitating stones

Builds in useless space its godly home.[3]

Song is central to the Judaic experience. We do not pray; we daven, meaning we sing the words we direct toward Heaven. Nor do we read the Torah. Instead we chant it, each word with its own cantillation. Even rabbinical texts are never merely studies; we chant them with the particular sing-song known to all students of Talmud. Each time and text has its specific melodies. The same prayer may be sung to half-a-dozen different tunes depending on whether it is part of the morning, afternoon, or evening service, and whether the day is a weekday, a Sabbath, a festival, or one of the High Holy Days. There are different cantillations for biblical readings, depending on whether the text comes from Torah, the prophets, or the Ketuvim, ‘the writings’. Music is the map of the Jewish spirit, and each spiritual experience has its own distinctive melodic landscape.

Judaism is a religion of words, and yet whenever the language of Judaism aspires to the spiritual it modulates into song, as if the words themselves sought escape from the gravitational pull of finite meanings. Music speaks to something deeper than the mind. If we are to make Torah new in every generation, we have to find ways of singing its song a new way. The words never change, but the music does.

A previous Chief Rabbi of Israel, Rabbi Avraham Shapiro, once told me a story about two great rabbinic Sages of the nineteenth century, equally distinguished scholars, one of whom lost his children to the secular spirit of the age, the other of whom was blessed by children who followed in his path. The difference between them was this, he said: when it came to *seudah shlishit*, the third Sabbath meal, the former spoke words of Torah while the latter sang songs. His message was clear. Without an affective dimension – without music – Judaism is a body without a soul. It is the songs we teach our children that convey our love of God.

Some years ago, one of the leaders of world Jewry wanted to find out what had happened to the “missing Jewish children” of Poland, those who, during the war, had been adopted by Christians families and brought up as

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Catholics. He decided that the easiest way was through food. He organized a large banquet and placed advertisements in the Polish press, inviting whoever believed they had been born a Jew to come to this free dinner. Hundreds came, but the evening was on the brink of disaster since none of those present could remember anything of their earliest childhood – until the man asked the person sitting next to him if he could remember the song his Jewish mother had sung to him before going to sleep. He began to sing *Rozhinkes mit Mandlen* ('Raisins and Almonds') the old Yiddish lullaby. Slowly others joined in, until the whole room was a chorus. Sometimes all that is left of Jewish identity is a song.

Rabbi Yechiel Michael Epstein (1829-1908) in the introduction to the *Aruch HaShulchan*, Choshen Mishpat, writes that the Torah is compared to a song because, to those who appreciate music, the most beautiful choral sound is a complex harmony with many different voices singing different notes. So, he says, it is with the Torah and its myriad commentaries, its "seventy faces". Judaism is a choral symphony scored for many voices, the Written Text its melody, the Oral Tradition its polyphony.

So it is with a poetic sense of closure that Moses' life ends with the command to begin again in every generation, writing our own scroll, adding our own commentaries, the people of the book endlessly reinterpreting the book of the people, and singing its song. The Torah is God's libretto, and we, the Jewish people, are His choir. Collectively we have sung God's Song. We are the performers of His choral symphony. And though when Jews speak they often argue, when they sing, they sing in harmony, because words are the language of the mind but music is the language of the soul.

[1] Laws of Tefillin, Mezuzah and Sefer Torah, 7:1

[2] Antonio Damasio, *Descartes' Error: Emotion, Reason, and the Human Brain*, London, Penguin, 2005.

[3] "Sonnets to Orpheus," book II, sonnet 10.

The Person in the Parsha **Rabbi Dr. Tzvi Hersh Weinreb**

Reflections Upon the Year's End

It is the last Sabbath of this year, and we will shortly usher in the New Year. Without a doubt, there is quite a bit of sadness attached to this Sabbath, and indeed, to this time of year. Sure, we look forward to a new year with new blessings and new opportunities. But we cannot escape the fact that this year was marked with its frustrations, disappointments, and even, yes, tragedies.

It is in a state of physical and spiritual exhaustion that we find ourselves on this last Sabbath of the year. Our energies are spent, our vigor diminished. Amazingly, this mood is especially reflected in the opening verses of the second of this week's double Torah portion, *Nitzavim-Vayeilech* (Deuteronomy 29:9-31:30).

"Moses went and spoke these words to all Israel. He said to them: I am now 120 years old, I can no longer come and go. Moreover, the Lord has said to me, 'You shall not go across yonder Jordan.'" (Deuteronomy 31:1-2)

Who cannot hear resignation in the voice of Moses, and perhaps even a note of despair?

Rashi notes the words of our Sages, who are surely in tune with Moses' mood when they comment, "The traditions and the wellsprings of wisdom were shutting down for him."

Rabbi Chaim ben Attar, known because of his masterwork *Ohr HaChaim* as the "saintly" *Ohr HaChaim*, answers the question raised by the mystical *Zohar*: "Moses went...? Where did he go?" He suggests that the phrase "Moses went..." signifies that "he felt that his soul was leaving him, and that he was aware that his end was drawing near on that day."

And so, this year is waning, as is the life of Moses. A cloud of sadness envelops us, and though there is the glimmer of the New Year's light upon the horizon, it somehow feels that there is still a great distance between us and that light.

I once, in the grips of this mood of sadness during this same time of year, paid a visit to my parents' grave. This act of homage was consistent with the ancient Jewish custom of visiting the graves of one's ancestors during the month of Elul, just prior to Rosh Hashanah.

As I stood before my mother's grave, may she rest in peace, it was the fragrance of the sweet holiday meals which she prepared that rose to my nostrils, and the image of her kindling the holiday candles that appeared before my eyes.

As I stood before my father's grave, and he died quite a few years before my mother, I had a different experience entirely. My father was a prayer leader in the synagogue, a *baal tefilah*, literally a "master of prayer." I closed my eyes and remembered well standing beside him as he positioned himself before the lectern at the front of the small synagogue in which he habitually prayed.

At that poignant moment, there emerged from the recesses of my memory a teaching of the sainted Rabbi Levi Yitzchok of Berditchev. Although I had not seen that teaching in print for many years, at that moment I could recall the text verbatim. It was a teaching on the very text which we are now considering: "And Moses went and spoke..."

Rabbi Levi Yitzchok pointed out that, when our Sages referred to the prayer leader, they sometimes said, "One goes down before the lectern;" but sometimes they said, "One passes before the lectern." Rabbi Levi Yitzchak, therefore, distinguishes between two modes of the experience of prayer.

Likutei Divrei Torah

In the first instance, the person feels spiritually inadequate, and turns to the words to lead him as he approaches God. Such a person "goes down before the lectern." This teaching becomes more impactful when one realizes that the Hebrew term for lectern, *teiva*, also means "word." He "goes down before the word," relying upon the liturgy itself to compensate for his personal limitations.

In the second instance, on the other hand, we have the person who "passes before the lectern." This person "leads the words." He is, in a sense, spiritually independent of the text of the liturgy, so righteous is he. This, writes Rabbi Levi Yitzchok, was the level of Moses through most of his life.

"However," concludes Rabbi Levi Yitzchok, "when Moses was at the end of his days and when the fountain of wisdom was no longer accessible to him, he regressed to the level in which 'words led him.' This is the meaning of 'And Moses went and spoke'—that he went to the word, which was above him."

As I stood before my father's grave, enchanted by Rabbi Levi Yitzchak's profound insight into the experience of prayer, I realized that my father's unique talent was his ability to begin the services he led as one who "went down before the lectern". But then, with the sweetness of his melodic voice and with the passion of his unadulterated sincerity, he rose to a higher level, and not only "passed before the lectern" himself, but inspired others to ascend with him to that higher sphere.

As the current year ebbs away, we are overcome by remorse, and we regret our failures and shortcomings. We certainly feel spiritually inadequate. But we can take solace in the fact that we have access to "the words." In just a matter of days, we will be able to go "down before the lectern," and allow the sacred words of the High Holiday liturgy to lead us to a higher and purer place.

Moreover, we can all be hopeful that we will be inspired, if only temporarily, to rise above the rank of those who "go down before the lectern," and reach the spiritual heights of those who "pass before it."

Rabbi Dr. Norman J. Lamm's **Derashot Ledorot**

At Summer's End

The summer is over, and we observe today the last Shabbat before Rosh Hashana. As the last syllables of the dying year fade away, we shall begin, tonight, the *Selihot*—the appraisal of ourselves, our failures and our successes, and our petition for forgiveness as we look forward towards the next year.

How do most of us respond naturally when we challenge ourselves to this self-appraisal, to evaluate the year we are now ushering out? What have been our attainments and our accomplishments? No doubt, the majority of

us and those in our social class, in this economy of abundance, will be able to record an impressive number of achievements and feel a warm glow of satisfaction. Business, I am told, has been good, our reputations have been upheld or enhanced, we have made progress on almost all fronts.

And yet--if that is our attitude, it is the wrong one with which to end the old year and begin the new. Listen to how the prophet Jeremiah sums up what ought to be our mood on this threshold of the changing years. Avar katzir kalah kayitz ve'anahnu lo nashanu- "the harvest is past, the summer is ended, and we are not saved" (Jeremiah 8:20). For our prophet, the dominant moods at summer's end is not one of jubilation and satisfaction, but one of disappointment and frustration. He turns to his contemporaries, in the agricultural society of those times, and tells them: you may have had a good and bountiful harvest, you may be pleased with yourselves at the ingathering of the summer's fruit; but that is not what really counts. Ve'anahnu lo nashanu- "we are not saved."

Those are hard words, words with a cutting edge, words that etch like acid on the flabby and complacent heart. Yet without these words and the attitude they summon up, we remain blind out of contact with reality, caught up in the euphoria of a dream world. Our sacred tradition prefers that we end the old year and prepare for the new year with the heroic self-criticism of a Jeremiah--with a confession of frustration. We look back over this past year and we think we are well off. Yet for all our work, for all our victories, our triumphs in business and social life, our attainments and profits that we have entered into our ledgers and accounted for, for all that we have done and all we have harvested--we have a nagging sense of futility and helplessness! Ve'anahnu lo nashanu- "and we are not saved!"

If we follow our natural instinct and pamper ourselves with self-gratulation, we will never grow; honesty is sometimes cruel and devastating, but it is indispensable. Without acknowledging our failures of last year, we can never avoid them in the coming year. The parent or child, congregation or family, community or nation which rejects reproach and criticism, is like the businessman who prefers to ignore his accountant's stern rebuke as to the conduct of his affairs. The feeling of frustration, of being dissatisfied and unredeemed despite our harvests, is most appropriate for this season of summer's end. Every man must ask himself: have I been a good husband this year, or have I been indifferent to my wife, taking her for granted? Each woman must ask: have I been the proper kind of helpmate, or have I allowed my selfish concerns to interfere with the harmony of our home? Those of us who are blessed with parents--have we acted towards them with honor and love, or have we allowed the excuse of our busyness to deny them the companionship and affection and feeling of importance that they crave? Have we acquitted

ourselves well in our responsibilities towards our children--or have we so involved ourselves in "activities" on behalf of our children's welfare that we have overlooked the most significant element: the direct relationship of ourselves with our children?

At summer's end, after the fruits of our labors are harvested, we concentrate on the discrepancy between the real and the ideal, and we emerge with the self-judgment: va'anahnu lo nashanu.

Indeed, Moses, in today's Sidra, experiences the same frustration, in an even more tragic sense. Hinkha shokhev im avotekha-- "behold, you are going to die," he is told by the Lord. What kind of harvest is Moses to reap at the end of 120 summers of utter dedication, toil, often bitterness and anguish? Ve'kam ha-am ha-zeh ve'zanah aharei elohei nekhar ha-aretz--This same people to whom you gave your life, whom you taught the worship of the One G-d, will immediately upon your death forget all about you and go astray after the local pagan deities. What a come-down! What bitter harvest! Va'anahnu lo nashanu!

Unless the words we recite in our Selihot prayers, which we shall begin reciting tonight, are merely empty, automatic, rote prayers, we must be prepared to translate them into relevant, contemporary terms. If the Selihot means anything at all, then it means that at this season we must cease the bombastic little ritual of proclaiming in public "I am proud to be a Jew," and acknowledge in private, amongst ourselves, that occasionally "I am ashamed as a Jew." We shall say those words tonight: Ashamnu mi-kol am, "we are more guilty than any other people": boshnu mi-kol dor, "we have incurred more shame than any other generation." Perhaps, indeed,

our greater guilt is the result of the fact that we have more to be ashamed of than any generation of Jews that preceded us. Shall we not be ashamed to the core of our souls when every time we read statistics about the religiosity of the American people, the Jews always trail(ing) the other major religions in the degree of their religious devotion? What Jew is not embarrassed by the fact that the leading peddlers of smut, and their most articulate defenders, having intensely Jewish names? Or, that the most disgraceful and degenerate novels are by Jewish authors about Jewish life? Boshnu mi-kol dor, how disgraceful! Or what shall we say to the blasphemous abominations of a member of the Supreme Court of Israel who compares our Talmudic laws, which declare a child to follow the faith of its mother, with the infamous Nuremberg laws of the Nazis? If this is the fruit of the summer's end of fifteen years of independence, if this is the harvest of all our tears and toil and hopes and work and sacrifice, then Jeremiah is right: ve'anahnu lo nashanu- indeed, "we are not saved," we have a long way to go!

Likutei Divrei Torah

How dreadfully frustrating and devastating to learn that pious Jews, so-called, with all the outward appurtenances of Old World devoutness, are arrested because of illegal dealings on an international scale. What a sense of frustration for all of us who devote our lives to teaching that Judaism leads to a different kind of conduct! What bushah! This week another event occurred which cast doubt about the quality of our religious harvest at this summer's end in Israel. You probably read about the raid by over-zealous students on the Christian Mission schools in three cities in Israel. This was understandable, but inexcusable.

Understandable, because the missionaries, despite all their denials, have been feeding on human misery and exploiting human anguish to achieve their nefarious ends. They have bribed poor, underfed, underclothed children of large and penniless Oriental Jewish immigrants. "Accept Christianity and we shall feed you"--as simple as that. If that is the only way Christianity can win converts, then it is a commentary on the weakness of that faith as well as the unscrupulousness of its adherents; especially if, in these post-Hitler years, it finds it more important to destroy more Jewish souls than to atone for Christianity's historic crime of conscience, its sin of silence during those terrible years. If Christians want to know where they ought to propagate their faith of love, any of us could easily direct them to fertile fields--such as the Archdiocese of Argentina. Understandable it is; provocation was there--but utterly inexcusable! Lo zu ha-derekh--this is not the way! For religious youths to break windows and commit violence is unforgivable. No one has the right to perpetrate a hillul ha-shem, and a lawless attack [against] even those unworthy individuals is a desecration of G-d's Name. The harvest of all our religious educational efforts in Israel must not include the fruits of violence; otherwise, va'anahnu lo nashanu.

At a much lower level of agonizing disappointment, but still in the same pattern and spirit, each and every congregation must pose before itself the same question. What kind of year have we had? Most synagogues and temples can probably produce impressive figures and overwhelming statistics: increased membership, more people, greater attendance, more activities--a wonderful congregational harvest! And yet, if they are honest, then the rabbis and leaders and members of a congregation- any congregation!-must be ready to admit that to a large extent ve'anahnu lo nashanu, we are yet unredeemed. As long as our people do not translate affiliation into the observance of Shabbat, membership into greater honesty and integrity in their business and social lives, participation in "activities" into greater dedication to Jewish education, dues-paying into an increased sense of responsibility for Jewish philanthropy, then much of the fruit of our harvest must go to waste and the summer must end on a frustrating note. "The harvest

has past, and the summer is ended, but we are not saved.” To a large extent we have tilled the wrong field, planted the wrong seeds, harvested the wrong fruit. Last year’s harvest was plenty—but a good part of it was, like gourds, outwardly attractive, but inedible and unable to sustain life.

Do I mean to say that the picture is all black? Heavens, no! There are many shafts of light that cut across the gloom, there are many reasons for healthy and realistic optimism. More of our youth is returning to Judaism, Orthodoxy is achieving a greater prestige, our educational institutions are increasing. In fact, one can say that the last several years have seen a decided improvement and an upward trend.

What I am emphasizing is that there is a time and place for everything. We American Jews have silently accepted a new dogma: that you must always assume that this is the best of all possible worlds, that to admit less than success is neurotic and bad business, and that to congratulate yourself is to keep in the spirit of things. This dogma may come from Madison Avenue, but certainly not from Mt. Sinai. And at this time of the year, at summer’s end, in the season of Selihot, we turn the eyes of our mind and our heart to our failures, our inadequacies, our shortcomings.

Such an admission of error, of frustration, of spiritual poverty amidst material wealth, of having pursued the wrong goals and succeeded in the wrong ambitions, can be wonderfully creative—but it requires courage, guts, backbone. The weak, the immature, the incompetent—they cannot abide anything but complaints and blanket surface-optimism. The strong, the mature, the stable—they can face up to the truth even if it be unpleasant, they can bare their hearts and acknowledge failure. For they know that the road to ultimate triumph in the things that really matter is paved with cobblestones of little failures freely acknowledged and lovingly corrected.

Now we begin a new year, and if we realize the mistakes of the past we can prevent them in the future. Now we must plant new seeds of the spirit, of Torah, and above all of love: love of G-d, love of Israel, love of mankind. Let us plant them with care, with dedication, with tenderness. And if the planting is marked with tears for the failures of yesteryear, may they end this next year in a song of joy for a harvest of happiness. Ha-zor'im be'dimah be'rinah yiktzoru— may those who sow in tears, reap the harvest of all their efforts and their work in joy and in happiness.

Torah.Org: Rabbi Yissocher Frand

Serenity at the Extremes: We All Struggle—But That's a Good Sign

Moshe Rabbeinu tells Klal Yisrael at the beginning of our parsha: “You are standing today, all of you, before Hashem your G-d:” (Atem Nitzavim hayom kulchem lifnei

Hashem Elokeichem) [Devorim 29:9] There is a very famous Medrash Aggadah quoted by Rashi here [Pasuk 12]: “Why was this passage juxtaposed with the curses (at the end of Parshas Ki Savo)? Since they had just heard ninety-eight frightening curses besides the forty-nine curses at the end of Sefer VaYikra, their faces turned pallid. They asked – ‘Who can withstand all of this?’ Moshe therefore came to mollify them and calm them down. You are still standing here today. You have angered the Almighty very often and He has not destroyed you.” As if to say – “You have been bad before, you will be bad again. You will get through it all! Don’t worry.” This is the context of “Atem Nitzavim haYom...”

A famous question is asked on this Rashi. Moshe appears to be defeating the whole purpose of his mussar schmooze. He gets them really shaken up. They are trembling in their boots – “What is going to be with us?” And he tells them “Chill. Don’t worry about it.” This is equivalent to a Mashgiach Ruchani getting up in the Yeshiva and reading the riot act to the bochurim. The bochurim are trembling that because of their behavior they are all going to burn in Gehinnom. And then the Mashgiach gives them all a wink and tells them “Don’t worry!”

So “what did the Sages accomplish with their enactment?” The point of the Tochacha was to read them the riot act and to put the fear of G-d in them!

I saw in the sefer Avir Yosef a very interesting observation from Rav Elya Ber Wachtfogel, the Rosh Yeshiva of the Yeshiva of South Fallsburg. The Tosefta in Maseches Shabbos notes that of all the city dwellers in the world, the people of Sodom are the calmest. They have the most menuchas haNefesh. The Tosefta says that, in fact, that is what brought Lot to Sodom. He checked out all the cities around and he saw that the people of Sodom were the most serene.

What does this Tosefta mean? Why were the people so serene in Sodom? Rav Elya Ber Wachtfogel explains: Lot lived with Avraham Avinu. With Avraham Avinu he saw great serenity. He saw a man that was at peace with himself. He was calm and content with life. Lot said to himself “I want that kind of life. I want the same serenity that my uncle Avraham has.”

Why was Avraham Avinu able to achieve such serenity? The rest of us experience this ongoing tension between our guf (body) and our neshama (soul). Our flesh wants one thing and our neshama wants something else. It is a battle from Day One. As soon as the neshama enters a person, the neshama is not happy. “I don’t want to be in this world. I don’t want to deal with the physicality and material nature of Olam HaZeh.” On the other hand, the body wants the physical pleasures of life.

Likutei Divrei Torah

That is the ongoing battle and tension that exists in every human being. For this reason, we are not all calm, serene, and content. One day we are like this and one day we are like that. Or, one minute we are like this and one minute we are like that. We may be one type of person when we are in shul, and another type of person when we are at work.

Avraham Avinu solved the problem. He was 100% spiritual (kulo ruchniyus). He devoted his life to improving his neshama. Therefore, there was no tension. There was this enviable calm and serenity in his lifestyle.

I once had the opportunity to spend ten minutes with Reb Aharon Leib Shteinman (zt”l). If you ever were in his little house, he sat there on a roll-away sofa bed. They put up a chair that served as a backing. The man was so at peace. It would seem like he didn’t have a worry in the world. He had patience for everyone. Besides the tzidkus (piety) that emanated from him, there was also this serenity. That is because—to a very large extent—he also solved this human dilemma by choosing a very ascetic life.

Lot envied this. Except, Lot said to himself, “But I can’t live that type of life.” Lot knew that he could not live such a spiritually-infused lifestyle. He still lusted for the pleasures of the flesh. Therefore, his only option was the other way of achieving serenity – at the other end of the spectrum. The people of Sodom also did not have a conflict. They also felt no tension between the desires of their guf and the desires of their neshama. They threw out the ruchniyus and lived by the motto of “Eat, drink, and be merry – for tomorrow you may die!”

They opted to completely forget about satisfying the neshama and just concentrated on satisfying their bodily needs and desires. This is a path to you-know-where, but it is serene. There is no tension. That is why Lot chose Sodom—it was the most serene and contented spot on the globe.

Moshe Rabbeinu addressed the Jewish people and told them: You are all standing here before Hashem today. Don’t worry!

We asked that Moshe destroyed his whole mussar schmooze! The answer is that Moshe Rabbienun was telling them in the Tochacha, “What happened to Sodom will happen to you.” [Devarim 29:22]. But it will only happen to you like it happened to Sodom if you, like them, forsake ruchniyus totally. As long as you feel this tension, as long as you are still fighting the battle, and the struggle with your neshama still bothers you, then what happened to Sodom will not happen to you.

Moshe Rabbeinu tells them the ninety-eight curses and their faces paled, but he tells them – the fact that your faces paled—that is a good sign. It shows that you are still battling; you are still in the fight. As long as you are still waging the battle and are still trying to choose

ruchniyus, even though you have already sinned to the Almighty many times, nevertheless you still want what is right, and it still bothers you when it is not right. Therefore, do not worry – the Ribono shel Olam will not wipe you out like He did to Sodom. Sodom's fate is only for those who have totally forsaken the world of spirituality.

These are very encouraging words as we approach Rosh HaShannah. We all have our issues that we need to deal with. We are now approaching the Great Day of Judgement. It is scary, because we look back on our past year and we know that we have fallen down like we have sometimes fallen down in the past. But we are still in the battle, and we are still fighting. It still bothers us. A person only needs to worry when it DOES NOT bother him anymore. Only when a person has achieved the serenity of Sodom is it necessary to really be concerned. The mere fact that our faces are pale and that we feel the need and desire to improve is the biggest testament that we are still fighting the battle. Please G-d, with that merit of our seeking ruchniyus, the Ribono shel Olam shall bless us with the rest of Klal Yisrael and Eretz Yisrael for a year of life and health, financial well-being, and peace upon Yisroel.

Rabbi Dr. Nachum Amsel **Encyclopedia of Jewish Values***

The Jewish Messiah

In this week's Torah portion of Nitzavim, the verse states that in the "last" generation" (Deuteronomy 29:21) these events will occur. What follows is a description of a mass return to the Land of Israel by the Jews following the fulfillment of the Blessings and the Curses, followed by what seems to be idyllic and peaceful times when the Jews will strictly follow the ways of God (Deuteronomy 30:1-10). This seems to be an allusion to Messianic times. But what exactly are Messianic times in Judaism? And who is the Messiah? What will he do? What will be the signs of his coming? How will we know when he arrives? How will life change it at all? And if these verses refer to the times of the Messiah, why are they not stated explicitly in the Torah? Like every religious community, the Jewish community has traditionally been no different in its fascination and curiosity in trying to understand the Jewish idea of *Messiah*.

Before delving into these questions, we must heed the words, warnings, and cautionary remarks of Maimonides on this specific topic. In discussing the general concept of the Jewish Messiah, Maimonides notes (Maimonides, Hilchot Melachim 12:2) that the true ideas of *Messiah* are hidden from us, and we cannot know the precise order of events at that time ("the end of days") until they occur. Maimonides continues to say that the prophets themselves spoke in very obscure terms about the coming of the Messiah, in part, because the details are not that clear in the Jewish tradition.

In fact, according to Maimonides, the Rabbis and teachers have no specific tradition that was passed down from generation to generation regarding the specifics of *Messiah*, and, therefore, used the allusions in the scripture to formulate a general idea on this topic. It is for this reason that there is much disagreement about the details surrounding the Jewish Messiah. Maimonides warns the Jews, precisely for these reasons, not to spend too much time analyzing the Midrashim that speak about the Messiah.

Nevertheless, despite these warnings, the fascination has persisted and much has been written. Maimonides himself writes extensively about the topic. Therefore, in this spirit, we will try to discuss certain general concepts and answer some of the mysteries surrounding the Jewish idea of *Messiah*. It should be noted at the outset that there is a fundamental argument between those commentaries who write that the coming of the Messiah will be a supernatural event and, thus, the laws of nature will subsequently be changed forever (Saadia Gaon, Emunot Vedeot 8:6, Nachmanides, Derashot Torat Hashem Temima), and those commentaries who write that nature will not be altered in any way, and the Messiah's coming will be a natural event (Maimonides is the most prominent of these commentaries [Hilchot Melachim 11:3 and 12:1]). We will follow the approach of Maimonides who explains the idea of Messiah and his coming within the laws of nature.

Belief in Messiah - Even though Maimonides acknowledges great diversity in the specifics of understanding how the Messiah will come, all Jewish commentaries agree on the basic concept that there *will* be a Messiah. Belief in the coming of the Messiah is basic to Judaism. Maimonides, for example, declares that anyone who denies the concept of *Messiah* in Judaism, denies the entire Torah (Maimonides, Hilchot Melachim 11:1). Maimonides also included this belief in the Messiah as one of the thirteen basic principles of Judaism (Maimonides, Principles of Judaism, #12). There is a specific commandment to wait in anticipation for the Messiah, no matter how long he tarries (Maimonides, Hilchot Melachim 11:1, 12:2 and Principle #12), which is based on the verse in Habakkuk (Habakkuk 2:3). The Talmud also declares that one of the first questions a person will be asked after death is "did you wait in anticipation for Messiah's arrival (Shabbat 31a). In the Grace After Meals recited by traditional Jews after every meal, they ask to merit for the days of the Messiah (Next-to-last paragraph of Grace after Meals). Although many religions believe in the concept of a Messiah, albeit in a different form from the Jewish idea of *Messiah*, general belief in the coming of the Messiah is a core principle of Judaism.

Why No Mention In The Torah - If it is true that the concept of Messiah is so basic to Judaism, then why is there no specific mention

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of the Messiah in the Torah, in our Parsha, for example? Some have inferred that the lack of a specific reference to the Messiah in the Torah is proof that the Messianic concept came much later in Jewish history or that it is not truly a basic Jewish concept. These explanations are far from the facts, as a close examination of the verses will reveal, and also far from the normative Jewish viewpoint. The lack of explicit mention of a Messiah in the Torah has been explained along with the general lack of spiritual rewards and references in the Torah. Although a part of basic Jewish belief, the spiritual aspects of Judaism and the spiritual rewards for Mitzvah actions are also not mentioned at all in the Torah. Why not? Numerous commentaries have written that the Torah only mentions concepts to which the entire people could relate in the immediate sense. In selecting the lowest common denominator, the Torah spoke to *all* the people and delineated those ideas and rewards that *everyone* could grasp. Thus, it is the riches of much food that are promised as a reward for Mitzvot in the Shema prayer (Deuteronomy 11:13-15), and not any spiritual promises, although these rewards would come as well. Ideas beyond the comprehension of some Jews such as spirituality and the World to Come are not written, although they are an important part of Jewish belief. Therefore, the idea of a Messiah, who would come one day far in the future, was also not mentioned in the Torah itself. It was left to the prophets to spell out these notions more concretely. The concept of Messiah therefore, was not mentioned openly, but was merely alluded to in the Torah.

The concept of a special time "at the end of days" is certainly referred to in the Torah itself without elaborating on what this signifies. Jacob wishes to tell his children what life will be like "at the end of days" (Genesis 49:1), but God prevented him from doing so. Bilaam's prophecy about the Jewish people also refers to "the end of days" (Numbers 24:14). Likewise, at the end of his life, Moses twice refers to life "at the end of days" (Deuteronomy 4:30 and 31:29). We can see, therefore, that while the idea of Messiah and a special time at the end of history was not openly spelled out in the Torah, it was alluded to numerous times. In the books of the Prophets, particularly in the books of Isaiah and Ezekiel, the references and specifics about the Messiah are more clearly delineated. The Messianic concepts are described in greater detail than in the Torah when these prophets, unlike the Torah, speak about "the end of days" (Isaiah 2:2, Jeremiah 23:20, 30:24, 48:47, 49:39, Ezekiel 38:16, Hosea 3:5, Micah 4:1 and Daniel 10:14). Rather than analyze each specific reference, we will explain the general concepts about Messiah that have been derived from these sources.

Prohibition and Danger of Prediction

Although the Talmud is *filled* with specific mathematical predictions outlining the timing of the arrival of Messiah, Rabbi Samuel Ben Nechunya cursed all those who predicted the

timing of his arrival (Sanhedrin 97b). After the Talmud was completed, Jews in all generations continued to try to predict the precise time when the Messiah will come. Today, this practice continues unabated. Nevertheless, in his Code, the Mishne Torah, Maimonides forbids this practice and also curses anyone who attempts to predict the moment of the Messiah's arrival (Maimonides, Hilchot Melachim 12:2).

Why does Rabbi Samuel and later Maimonides forbid and vehemently curse this practice of prediction? Rabbi Samuel answers this question himself when he says that if a particular Messianic prediction will *not* come true, then Jews who believed in this prediction would completely abandon the idea of a Jewish Messiah (and, perhaps, even Judaism itself) (Sanhedrin 97b). Thus, the danger of possibly making this mistake could have dire consequences. Long after the Talmud records this reason, Jewish history has shown this to be true numerous times. The most famous of these false predictions and false messiahs in Jewish history is Shabbetai Tzvi. Based on the verse about Aaron coming to the Temple (Leviticus 16:3), the prediction was made that a priest (Shabbetai was a Kohen) would come to the Temple in *ZOT*, which means "with this" but has a numerical value of 408. Thus, in the Hebrew year 5408 (1648 C.E.), the Priest will come to the Temple. Unfortunately, many European Jews did not heed the words of Rabbi Samuel and Maimonides and faithfully believed this prediction. When Shabbetai turned out to be a false Messiah, thousands of Jews abandoned Judaism. History tells us, therefore, that the choice not to listen to those who predict the precise arrival time of the Messiah is the prudent and correct path. The Talmud (Pesachim 54b) specifically says that one of the things that are hidden from mankind is the return of the House of David, i.e., Messiah. Nevertheless, this did not prevent Jews and even the Talmud itself from trying to ascertain the timing of Messiah's arrival.

What General Conditions Will Bring Messiah?

- There are numerous different "signs" mentioned in the Talmud that identify the generation or conditions under which the Messiah will come (Mostly found in Sanhedrin 97 and 98). Among these specific signs include the generation that loses hope, the generation that is totally good or totally evil, the generation when there are few sages and much misfortune and the generation when youngsters are totally disobedient of their elders. It is quite easy to see why many people have studied these sources and have applied them to earlier generations and our generation as well. This also shows the danger of trying to predict the Messiah's specific arrival time. Maimonides himself (Maimonides, Hilchot Teshuva 7:5) follows the opinion in the Talmud (Sanhedrin 97b) that the coming of Messiah is tied to the performance of good deeds and Teshuva (repentance) by all Jews.

Who Is the Messiah and What Will

Messianic Times be Like? - Almost all commentaries seem to agree that the Messiah must be a descendant of the house of King David from the tribe of Judah (Maimonides, Hilchot Melachim 11:1). The reference to Messiah in the Silent Prayer and other sources is *Ben David*, the son of (King David), or someone from the House of David. The term "Messiah" is the Hebrew word for "the anointed one" which, in reality, signifies a Jewish king. Since all kings in Israel were anointed with oil, and since, in Jewish thought, the Messiah will be an anointed king, the term Messiah has been coined by all peoples. The personality of the Messiah, according to the view of Maimonides, is someone who could easily emerge in today's modern Jewish world. He will be a Jew of great Torah learning, full of Mitzvot-commandments and good deeds (Maimonides, Hilchot Melachim 11:4). He will also be a very charismatic figure and lead the masses of Jews to follow a path of Torah. This man will also be a military general who will fight wars on behalf of Israel and be victorious. After these great military victories, he will be presumed to be the Messiah (Maimonides, Hilchot Melachim 11:1 and 11:4). Then, when he rebuilds the Temple in Jerusalem and helps Jews from around the world to return to Israel, he will definitely be confirmed as the Messiah (Maimonides, Hilchot Melachim 11:4). After that, he will reestablish the Jewish religious court system in Israel and will also reestablish all Torah laws currently not in force because no Temple exists (Maimonides, Hilchot Melachim 11:1).

Until today's generation, the possibility of Maimonides' words becoming fact or becoming true was unrealistic or even impossible. There were no Jewish generals for the past 2,000 years until 1948. There was never a possibility for one man to inspire every Jew on the planet to return to Israel or observance until the advent of satellite technology or the Internet. And yet today, it is not that difficult to imagine a charismatic person who could indeed fulfill every condition laid down by Maimonides in a tradition that goes back thousands of years. Although political and other considerations might present some difficulties in achieving all of Maimonides' conditions at this moment, one can certainly entertain the possibility of the arrival of the Messiah in our lifetime, according to this view.

Nature of The World in Messianic Times and the Order of Events

- Maimonides (Maimonides, Hilchot Melachim 11:1) follows the Talmudic dictum of Samuel (Shabbat 151b, Berachot 34b and Pesachim 68a) that there will be no change in nature at all during Messianic times, except that the Jewish people will no longer be subjugated to any other nation, and there will be no oppression of the Jews. Regarding the famous verse (Isaiah 11:6) about the lion and lamb living together in peace, which seems to contradict nature's status quo in Messianic times, Maimonides

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explains these ideas as an allegory -- that nations will live in peace with other nations (Maimonides, Hilchot Melachim 12:1). He does emphasize the peaceful nature of the world in Messianic times, following the general ideas expressed by Isaiah about peace (Isaiah 2:2-4).

Before the arrival of the Messiah, according to Maimonides, the prophet Elijah will come and try and make peace in the world. Then, there will be a massive world war between the two nations Gog and Magog (Maimonides, Hilchot Melachim 12:2). Only then will the Messiah arrive. After the Messiah has performed all the actions on behalf of the Jewish people outlined above, the rest of the world will come to fully recognize the Jewish God as the true God (Maimonides, Hilchot Melachim 11:4). The nature of peace in Messianic time will be such that everyone will be completely honest and there will be neither murder nor robbery in the world. There will be no war, no competition, or jealousy among people. All people will contemplate the existence and nature of God Almighty. Prophecy and the general high level of spirituality will be resumed in the world (Maimonides, Hilchot Melachim 12:4) and people will recognize that their purpose of existence is to learn Torah (Maimonides, Hilchot Melachim 12:5).

Although Maimonides himself said that the precise order of events is not revealed to us (Maimonides, Hilchot Melachim 12:2), the Talmud (Megillah 17b and 18a) seems to tell us that we can derive an alternative order of events in Messianic times, based on the order of blessings the Rabbis set up in the Silent Prayer, which is recited by Jews three times each day. In the middle blessings, the seventh blessing describes a request for general salvation. Three blessings later, Jews beseech God to ingather the exiles. This is followed by the blessing and request to reestablish Jewish courts. A few blessings later, Jews pray to God to rebuild the holy city of Jerusalem and then rebuild the Holy Temple. Only *then* do they request, in the next blessing, that the Messiah should arrive. This order of events does differ significantly from the order described by Maimonides.

The concept of Messiah and how he will relate to people in the non-Jewish world, as articulated by Maimonides, is recited, in greater detail, in the Aleinu prayer, also thrice daily. The second paragraph begins with a hope that the day will come when wickedness and wicked people will disappear from the world. It also predicts a time that all the people of the world will recognize the Jewish God and call out in His name. When all the peoples of the world accept God's sovereignty over the world, then the entire human race will be united as one.

*** This column has been adapted from a series of volumes written by Rabbi Dr. Nachum Amsel "The Encyclopedia of Jewish Values" available from Urim and Amazon. For the full article or to review all**

Ohr Torah Stone Dvar Torah

Moshe's Example of Personal Perseverance Rabbi Dr. Ari Silberman

Life, infused with activity, hustle, and bustle, is typified by movement from one place to another. This is true for our spiritual lives. Whereas angels are fixed without room for failure or growth, movement defines our humanity.

Interestingly, movement takes center stage at the beginning of the parasha, which opens with Moshe having finished speaking to Bnei Yisrael, who were standing (ניצבים). Moshe goes (וילך) towards them and passes on a message that he can no longer go out and come in (לצאת ולבוא). As we approach the end of Moshe's life and the end/beginning of Bnei Yisrael's journey to Eretz Yisrael, the theme of movement takes center stage and brings with it an important message.

While in the final stages of life, many people suffer physical and sometimes mental degradation; in the case of Moshe his eyes never dimmed (Deut 34:7), he climbs to his final resting place on Mount Nebo (Deut 34:1), and he 'goes' to Bnei Yisrael.

What then does Moshe mean when he tells them that he can no longer go out and return? According to the Ramban, Moshe's inability to go out and return alludes to his wisdom being concealed and the degradation of his prophetic powers. According to this approach it is fitting that the ultimate man of the spirit does not decline physically but spiritually as he approaches the end. However, if Moshe's spiritual deterioration is important why mention that Moshe 'goes' to Bnei Yisrael?

In a most fitting elegy, the commentators paint this 'going' to Bnei Yisrael as a picture of leadership and care that typified Moshe Rabbeinu. Ibn Ezra writes that Moshe went out to each tribe to bless them individually and tell them not to be afraid, despite his impending demise. The Ramban describes Moshe leaving the Levite camp and accompanying the people to the Israelite section 'as a host accompanies his friend.' These are all heart-warming portraits of an extraordinary leader farewelling his flock. Just as, according to Chazal, Moshe pursued a lone lamb into the wilderness and came upon Horev, he also follows Bnei Yisrael in one of his last acts as leader.

The Netziv, however, links Moshe's spiritual decline with this act of going to Bnei Yisrael. Since Moshe had lost his prophetic abilities, his message no longer resonated in the same way. And so, even at his last, to reach each member of Bnei Yisrael, Moshe had to take his message to them locally. He could no longer count on them standing and appreciating the Divine message and so had to speak where they stood. Moshe has to engage actively. This

is not only the act of a fatherly leader but the act of a prophet fiercely driven by the Divine message.

In this way, Moshe comes full circle because Moshe's journey truly begins with another heroic act of 'going' (וילך). Moshe was conceived, Chazal tell us, as an act of defiance amid harsh decrees. Moshe's parents had been married but had separated due to the decree to murder baby boys. It was only after prodding from Miriam, Chazal teach us, they chose to remarry and conceive Moshe. And the verse which describes this act states that a man went (וילך) from the house of Levi. Moshe was born at a moment of וילך – going out despite the difficulties. Despite his changing circumstances, Moshe heroically insists on passing on the Torah.

One of Moshe's last acts is to go towards the people of Israel. This 'going' (וילך) is a testament to Moshe's heroism and concern as a leader and beautifully complements the 'going' (וילך) of his parents. Though his spiritual prowess is reduced Moshe teaches us the life-giving vitality of movement and closeness to others.

For us individually, particularly during these days of repentance, these final acts command us to persevere and to keep growing throughout our lives. On a national level, the message is clearer still. When the clarity and power of Torah no longer resonates as deeply with Am Yisrael, we need to go out to the people and be close to them. We need to persist in spreading the light of Torah to where the people are – physically and spiritually. Our goal is to defy circumstance, to bridge physical and spiritual distance, to ensure that the timeless message of Torah reaches every heart.

Torah.Org Dvar Torah

by Rabbi Label Lam

Fill It Up with Super

If there is one operative word on Rosh HaShana that the Good Year balloon pulls along its banner, it is the word, "HaMelech" – "The King!" Rosh HaShana is a gigantic coronation of HASHEM as The King over the entire world and including ourselves too.

Rav Hirsch ztl. pointed out that the word Melech -King is comprised of three letters each of which can be used as a prefix. Together they give a portrait of The King. The letter MEM means "from" because everything comes from HASHEM. The letter LAMED means "to" or "for" because everything is ultimately for and goes back to HASHEM. The letter CHOF means "like" because everything reflects and bears a likeness to the Creator. The Zohar states, "Koach HaPoel B'Nifal" – "The power of the actor is in his actions. The signature of the artist can be found throughout his artwork. Then we can tag the letter HEY at the beginning," he HEY HaYedia" – "The HEY of Knowledge" because we are meant to know that HASHEM is not just a king but

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"The only King"! This is the idea we are meant to fill up on, on the holy day of Rosh HaShana, so that it keeps us going throughout the duration of the year.

Years back an Israeli friend Yossi had organized for me a number of speaking engagements. He was also the driver, designated to get me to these events. One frigid night as we started our long journey deep into the heart of Long Island, I happened to notice that we were extremely low on gas. I let Yossi know but he dismissed my concerns telling me that we'd be ok. Somehow, miraculously we made it to the class without incident. Even more amazingly though we made it almost all the way home as well. I nudged Yossi numerous times to stop for gas but he insisted that we wait to fill up in New Jersey where the price of a gallon of gas is always a little bit cheaper.

We just crossed over the George Washington Bridge and entered New Jersey and lo and behold we spotted a gas station. There was a sign indicating no u turn so Yossi made the u turn and we pulled into the gas station at about 1: AM. Since in New Jersey it is illegal to pump your own gas the attendant was forced out of the warm of his tiny booth. There striding to our car was a dark African immigrant with a wool cap pulled down almost covering his eyes. He seemed weary and annoyed by the extreme cold as he approached our car. At this point I told Yossi, "Watch, I'm gonna make his night!" Yossi cautioned me with a sense of alarm, "Don't tip'm! We came here to save a few bucks!" I assured him I had nothing like that in mind but maybe something better. I was going to add a little warmth of humanity into what is otherwise a pretty clinical relationship.

I then picked up the two empty Snapple bottles we had been drinking from and stepping out from the car, I approached the gas station attendant and asked him, "Do you recycle these or do they go here in the garbage can?" He mumbled, "They all go to the same place!" (That was my cue!) I said to him, "Everything comes from the same place and everything goes to the same place!" He nodded in agreement signaling to me that he understood some of the depth of what I had said, so I continued, "We all come from one place and we all go to one place! We all come from G-d and we all go back to G-d!" Now he was really listening deeply and so I took license to explain a little further. "If you understand that, then even if you have nothing, you have everything. If you have everything else, and you don't understand that then you have nothing!" At this point Yossi was urging him to fill it up with regular but I felt I had filled him and myself up with something super.

For this year, let's strive on Rosh HaShana to fill it up with super!

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Rabbi Wein's Weekly Blog

These final parshiyot of the Torah always coincide with the approaching end of the old year and the beginning of the new year. This is in line with the contents of these parshiyot which contain the review of Moshe's career as the leader of Israel and of his life and achievements. So too does the end of the year demand of us a review, if not of our entire past life, at least a review and accounting of our actions during the past year.

Moshe's review is really the main contents of the book of Dvarim itself. Though it recalls historical and national events, there is no doubt that Moshe himself is the central figure of the book. He records for us his personal feelings and candidly admits as to his disappointments and frustrations. But he never departs from his central mission of reminding the people of Israel of the unbreakable covenant that has been formed between them and their Creator.

That covenant is renewed again in this week's parsha. It is no exaggeration to assert that it is constantly renewed and at the year's end we are reminded of this. That is the essential essence of remembrance that characterizes this special season of the year. Remembrance brings forth judgment and accountability and leads to an eventual renewal of faith.

Moshe reminds the people that the future is also contained in their remembrance of the covenant. All the generations past, present and future are bound together in this covenant of accountability. And through this process, the mortal Moshe gains immortality, as all of us can acquire this immortality through our loyalty to the covenant.

Moshe at the end of his life has in no way lost his acumen, strength or vision. He leaves this world in perfect health and free of bodily ailments and restraints. Yet he tells us in this week's parsha that he "can no longer go forth and return." For humans exist by the will of God and when that will decrees the end of life then the human being will cease to function on this earth. Who can claim greater merits in this world than Moshe had? Yet the hand of human mortality struck him down.

Part of the great lesson of Torah is that life continues without us necessarily being present. Moshe sees far into the distant future but knows that he will not be present to see those events actually unfold. He harkens back to the covenant of remembrance as being the instrument of his continuing presence throughout all of Jewish history. As long as the covenant is remembered and observed, Moshe is still present with Israel. It is this covenant that defines us as a people and even as individuals. Our relationship to it is under constant heavenly review. It should be self-evident that for our part we should enthusiastically renew our allegiance to it at this fateful part of our life and year.

Shabat shalom

Rabbi Berel Wein

To Renew our Days

NITZAVIM, VAYELECH

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks

The moment had come. Moses was about to die. He had seen his sister Miriam and brother Aaron pre-decease him. He had prayed to God – not to live forever, not even to live longer, but simply, "Let me go over and see the good land beyond the Jordan" (Deut. 3:25). Let me complete the journey. Let me reach the destination. But God said no:

"That is enough," the Lord said. "Do not speak to Me anymore about this matter."

Deut. 3:26

God, who had acceded to almost every other prayer Moses prayed, refused him this.[1]

What then did Moses do on these last days of his life? He issued two instructions, the last of the 613 commands, that were to have significant consequences for the future of Judaism and the Jewish people. The first is known as Hakhel, the command that the king should summon the people to gather during Succot following the seventh, Shemittah year:

"At the end of every seven years, in the year for cancelling debts, during the Festival of Tabernacles, when all Israel comes to appear before the Lord your God at the place He will choose, you shall read this law before them in their hearing. Assemble the people – men, women and children, and the foreigners residing in your towns – so they can listen and learn to fear the Lord your God and follow carefully all the words of this law. Their children, who do not know this law, must hear it and learn to fear the Lord your God as long as you live in the land you are crossing the Jordan to possess."

Deut. 31:10-13

There is no specific reference to this command in the later books of Tanach, but there are accounts of very similar gatherings: covenant renewal ceremonies, in which the king or his equivalent assembled the nation, reading from the Torah or reminding the people of their history, and calling on them to reaffirm the terms of their destiny as a people in covenant with God.

That, in fact, is what Moses had been doing for the last month of his life. The book of Deuteronomy as a whole is a restatement of the covenant, almost forty years and one generation after the original covenant at Mount Sinai. There is another example in the last chapter of the book of Joshua (see chapter 24 of the book of Joshua), once Joshua had fulfilled his mandate as Moses' successor, bringing the people across the Jordan, leading them in their battles, and settling the land.

Another occurred many centuries later in the reign of King Josiah. His grandfather, Menasseh, who reigned for fifty-five years, was one of the worst of Judah's kings, introducing various forms of idolatry, including child sacrifice. Josiah sought to return the nation to its faith, ordering among other things the cleansing and repair of the Temple. It was in the course of this restoration that a copy of the Torah was discovered,[2] sealed in a hiding place, to prevent it being destroyed during the many decades in which idolatry flourished and the Torah was almost forgotten. The king, deeply affected by this discovery, convened a Hakhel-type national assembly:

"Then the king called together all the elders of Judah and Jerusalem. He went up to the Temple of the Lord with the people of Judah, the inhabitants of Jerusalem, the priests and the prophets – all the people from the least to the greatest. He read in their hearing all the words of the Book of the Covenant, which had been found in the temple of the Lord. The king stood by the pillar and renewed the covenant in the presence of the Lord – to follow the Lord and keep his commands, statutes, and decrees with all his heart and all his soul, thus confirming the words of the Covenant written in this book. Then all the people pledged themselves to the Covenant."

2 Kings 23:1-3

The most famous Hakhel-type ceremony was the national gathering convened by Ezra and Nehemiah after the second wave of returnees from Babylon (Neh. 8-10). Standing on a platform by one of the gates to the Temple, Ezra read the Torah to the assembly, having positioned Levites throughout the crowd so that they could explain to the people what was being said. The ceremony that began on Rosh Hashanah, culminated after Succot when the people collectively "bound themselves with a curse and an oath to follow the Law of God given through Moses the servant of God and to obey carefully all the commands, regulations and decrees of the Lord our Lord" (Neh. 10:29).

The other command – the last Moses gave the people – was contained in the words: "Now write down this song and teach it to the Israelites," understood by rabbinic tradition to be the command to write, or at least take part in writing, a Sefer Torah. Why specifically these two commands, at this time?

Something profound was being transacted here. Recall that God had seemed brusque in His dismissal of Moses' request to be allowed to cross the Jordan. "That is enough ... Do not speak to Me anymore about this matter." Is this the Torah and this its reward? Is this how God repaid the greatest of the prophets? Surely not.

In these last two commands God was teaching Moses, and through him Jews throughout the ages, what immortality is – on earth, not just in heaven. We are mortal because we are physical, and no physical organism lives forever. We grow up, we grow old, we grow frail, we die. But we are not only physical. We are also spiritual. In these last two commands, we are taught what it is to be part of a spirit that has not died in four thousand years and will not die so long as there is a sun, moon, and stars.[3]

God showed Moses, and through him us, how to become part of a civilisation that never grows old. It stays young because it repeatedly renews itself. The last two commands of the Torah are about renewal: first collective, then individual.

Hakhel, the covenant renewal ceremony every seven years, ensured that the nation would regularly rededicate itself to its mission. I have often argued that there is one place in the world where this covenant renewal ceremony still takes place: the United States of America.

The concept of covenant played a decisive role in European politics in the sixteenth and seventeenth century, especially in Calvin's Geneva and in Scotland, Holland, and England. Its longest-lasting impact, though, was on America, where it was taken by the early Puritan settlers and remains part of its political culture even today. Almost every Presidential Inaugural Address – every four years since 1789 – has been, explicitly or implicitly, a covenant renewal ceremony, a contemporary form of Hakhel. In 1987, speaking at the bicentennial celebration of the American Constitution, President Ronald Reagan described the constitution as a kind of "covenant we've made not only with ourselves but with all of mankind... It's a human covenant; yes, and beyond that, a covenant with the Supreme Being to whom our founding fathers did constantly appeal for assistance." America's duty, he said, is "to constantly renew their covenant with humanity... to complete the work begun 200 years ago, that grand noble work that is America's particular calling – the triumph of human freedom, the triumph of human freedom under God." [4]

If Hakhel is national renewal, the command that we should each take part in the writing of a new Sefer Torah is personal renewal. It was Moses' way of saying to all future generations: It is not enough for you to say, I received the Torah from my parents (or grandparents or great-grandparents). You have to take it and make it new in every generation. One of the most striking features of Jewish life is that from Israel to Palo Alto, Jews are among the world's most enthusiastic users of information technology and have contributed disproportionately to its development (Google, Facebook, Waze). But we still write the Torah exactly as it was done thousands of years ago – by hand, with a quill, on a parchment scroll. This is not a paradox; it is a profound truth. People who carry their past with them, can build the future without fear.

Renewal is one of the hardest of human undertakings. Some years ago, I sat with the man who was about to become Prime Minister of Britain. In the course of our conversation he said, "What I most pray for is that when we get there (he meant, 10 Downing Street), I never forget why I wanted to get there." I suspect he had in mind the famous words of Harold Macmillan, British Prime Minister between 1957 and 1963, who, when asked what he most feared in politics, replied, "Events, dear boy, events."

Things happen. We are blown by passing winds, caught up in problems not of our making, and we drift. When that happens, whether to individuals, institutions, or nations, we grow old. We forget who we are and why. Eventually we are overtaken by people (or organisations or cultures) that are younger, hungrier, or more driven than us.

The only way to stay young, hungry, and driven is through periodic renewal, reminding ourselves of where we came from, where we are going, and why. To what ideals are we committed? What journey are we called on to continue? Of what story are we a part?

How precisely timed, therefore, and how beautiful, that at the very moment when the greatest of prophets faced his own mortality, that God should give him, and us, the secret of immortality – not just in heaven but down here on earth. For when we keep to the terms of the covenant, and making it new again in our lives, we live on in those who come after

us, whether through our children or our disciples or those we have helped or influenced. We "renew our days as of old" (Lamentations 5:21). Moses died, but what he taught and what he sought lives on.

[1] There is an important lesson here: It is the prayers we pray for others, and others pray for us, that are answered; not always those we pray for ourselves. That is why when we pray for the healing of the sick or the comfort of the mourners we do so specifically "in the midst of others" who are ill or bereaved. As Judah Halevi pointed out in *The Kuzari*, the interests of individuals may conflict with one another, which is why we pray communally, seeking the collective good.

[2] This is Radak and Ralbag's understanding of the event. Abarbanel finds it difficult to believe that there were no other copies of the Torah preserved even during the idolatrous periods of the nation's history, and suggests that what was discovered sealed in the Temple was Moses' own Torah, written by his hand.

[3] See Jeremiah 31.

[4] Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States, Ronald Reagan, 1987, 1040-43.

Community Rabbis without Charge, And Decent Salaries for Teachers Revivim

During the time of the rabbinic Sages, the Tannaim, rabbis earned their living through their own labor and taught Torah for free. But in later generations, this ideal combination proved difficult to sustain * A reality in which a rabbi must demand his wages caused a desecration of God's honor, and therefore, many eminent Sages refused to serve in the rabbinate * Ideally, a community's rabbi should receive a proper salary, but until that materializes, it is fitting for the community's Torah scholars to teach Torah, and serve as rabbis free of charge * The representatives of the Ministry of Finance and the Teachers Union should be praised for signing a salary agreement last year, which honors teachers, and encourages the influx of new forces into the calling

Two weeks ago, I proposed encouraging communities to appoint rabbis even without pay – rabbis who would focus on the core rabbinic duty of teaching Torah, such as by giving a regular lesson between Mincha and Maariv, or after Maariv. I made this proposal out of an assessment that in the coming years, the Ministry of Religious Affairs is unlikely to appoint and finance rabbis acceptable to Religious-Zionist communities. Some readers took umbrage at my words, fearing harm to the prospects of communities funding rabbis and empowering their role.

Just as I Teach for Free, You Too Shall Also Teach for Free

I too believe it is good to fund synagogue rabbis, but my proposal stemmed from recognizing the reality that in the vast majority of Religious-Zionist synagogues in the larger cities, there is no rabbi. City and neighborhood rabbis do not fill this void either, since for decades, almost only rabbis who do not share the Religious-Zionist public's Torah outlook have been appointed to these positions. To begin amending this, we must get back to basics – the deepest and most primary role of the rabbi – to teach Torah. And this role should be carried out for free.

Our Sages said that rabbis should teach Torah for free, "As God commanded me – just as I teach for free, you too shall also teach for free" (Nedarim 37a). Thus, our Sages instructed in the Mishnah (Nedarim 35b) that even one who swore off benefit from another, may still teach him "midrash, halakhot, and aggadot," since one must teach them for free. So by teaching him, one does not provide him monetary worth.

The Guidance of Our Sages

This was also the advice of our Sages to rabbis, not to make a living from the Torah: "Rabbi Zadok said: do not make them a crown for self-exaltation, nor a spade with which to dig. So too Hillel used to say, "And he that puts the crown to his own use shall perish." Thus you have learned, anyone who derives worldly (monetary) benefit from the words of the Torah, removes his life from the world" (Avot 4:5). And Rashi, Rambam, Bartanura and others interpreted in the same manner.

And this is how many of Israel's eminent Torah scholars conducted themselves when not engaged in leadership positions. Hillel the Elder, before being appointed Nasi, was a woodcutter. Shimon Pakuli dealt in flax and wool, and Rabbi Yochanan Hasandlar made a living by sewing sandals. Rabbi Meir was a scribe, Rav Pappa planted trees, as well as many others (cited in Teshuvot Tashbetz, 147). The custom of the rabbis was to live modestly, and thus, in a relatively short time, provided for themselves.

Indeed, rabbis appointed to leadership roles received their livelihood honorably from the community. But most rabbis worked for their livelihood, and after their daily work, as well as on Shabbats and Festivals, they taught Torah to students, and answered queries.

When the number of students proliferated, and the rabbi lacked the time to both work and teach them all, they would ask him to curtail his labor, and instead, teach Torah to the students, paying him a "sekhar batala," (payment to refrain from doing other things), in other words, the amount he lost by teaching students instead of working (see Ran, Nedarim 37a, 've'le'inyan halakha').

The Need to Support Torah Scholars

However, over the generations, a difficult problem arose. Study material increased greatly, and the rabbis who were able on the one hand to cover the entire Torah in *iyun* (in-depth analysis) and *bekiut* (broad familiarity with large swaths of data), and on the other hand, make a decent living, dwindled. Ultimately, almost all agreed that if communities would not provide for the rabbis (even those not occupying leadership roles), the Jewish people would have almost no Torah scholars left. Thus, salaries were instituted for rabbis, Torah teachers and educators, and it was even agreed that students training for rabbinic and teaching positions would receive a stipend so they could grow in Torah knowledge (see Teshuvot, Vol.1, 142-147; BY, Rema YD 246:21; Marashal and Shach *ibid*).

Problems that Arose

However, since the livelihood of the rabbis was not regulated by the mitzvot of the Torah, such as the *terumot* and *ma'asrot* (tithes) to the Kohanim and Levites, or through formal rabbinic enactments, the need to provide for rabbis often led to the desecration of Torah, and desecration of God.

Consequently, Rambam (Maimonides) fiercely condemned the funding of Torah scholars (Laws of Talmud Torah 3:10): "Anyone who comes to the conclusion that he should involve himself in Torah study without doing work and derive his livelihood from charity, desecrates God's name, dishonors the Torah, extinguishes the light of faith, brings evil upon himself, and forfeits the life of the world to come, for it is forbidden to derive benefit from the words of Torah in this world. Our Sages declared: "Whoever benefits from the words of Torah forfeits his life in the world." Also, they commanded and declared: "Do not make them a crown to magnify oneself, nor an axe to chop with." Also, they commanded and declared: "Love work and despise rabbinic positions. All Torah that is not accompanied by work will eventually be negated and lead to sin. Ultimately, such a person will steal from others."

However, only exceptionally gifted individuals, such as Rambam, could support themselves by a craft, and at the same, time teach Torah and instruct *halakha*. Thus, for lack of any other option, despite the grief and humiliation, communities had to provide for rabbis, else they could not maintain Torah amongst the Jewish nation.

The 'Sefat Emet's' Guidance against Rabbinical Office

Rabbi Yehuda Aryeh Lieb Alter (1847-1905), the author of 'Sefat Emet', who led Polish Jewry's largest and foremost Gur Hasidut for about thirty-five years, guided his Hasidic rabbis to prefer earning their living through a craft or commerce over the rabbinate. Apparently, the flattery sometimes involved in attaining and working in a rabbinic office was not to his liking, and he therefore often shunned obtaining rabbinical posts in a manner that was not pure and clean.

Once, a disciple of his who was a Torah scholar, asked if he should take up a community's rabbinate. He replied: "I would be more jealous of you had you become a shoemaker." Sometime later, that same rabbi came to him, and presented the Rebbe a pair of shoes he had made with his own hands.

On another occasion, one of his enthusiastic Hasidim strove to obtain for a Gur Hasid the post of rabbi in the Warsaw community. When he had nearly attained his goal, he came to receive the Rebbe's approval for the appointment. But the Rebbe shrugged his shoulders in a motion of dismissal, signifying that striving for this was unimportant. Boldly, the Hasid asked: "Who then will be the rabbis?" The Rebbe replied: "Those who don't ask me!"

Not Making a Living from Torah

The 'Sefat Emet' was accustomed to subsist on very little, and not benefit at all from his Hasidim's money. His wife sold tobacco, which provided their livelihood. Once, when one of their sons fell ill and was in mortal danger, his wife, the Rebbetzin, came to him and said: "You help everyone through your prayers – why not our son!?" He replied: "Let us closely examine the matter. Perhaps we benefited in any way from the Hasidim." The Rebbetzin admitted that once, when in dire straits, she received some help from a Hasid. He said to her: 'Return what you took, and accept upon yourself never to benefit from the Hasidim again at all, and we will have no more heartache raising children' (From the book on the 'Sefat Emet' by Rabbi Avraham Yitzchak Bromberg z"l).

The Vision and Rectification for Now

In the final analysis, the ideal situation would be synagogues having rabbis who will teach Torah and provide comprehensive religious guidance to the community, and as compensation, receive an orderly salary, according to known reasonable standards. This would not bring desecration, rather, sanctification of God. Still, since this does not seem imminent, I proposed returning to the basics, and growing from there. The basis is that Torah scholars of the Jewish nation are commanded to teach Torah for free, the public is commanded to honor its teachers, and with no other alternative, these will be the synagogue rabbis.

In other words, Torah scholars already earning their living (usually from teaching), who in any case attend synagogue daily for *Shacharit*, *Mincha*, and *Maariv*, and to set times for Torah study – should be the ones asked to sit up front in the 'Mizrah' ("eastern wall"), give regular daily lessons, and deliver sermons and Torah classes on Shabbat and Festivals.

Through this, many will come to understand the importance of community rabbis' role, and find a way to arrange a salary for them, at least as *sekhar batala*. This will enable them to fulfill their role more successfully, enhancing Torah study for adults, youth and children, for regular synagogue attendees, and those who come only rarely, for the glory of Torah, the Nation, and the Land.

Teachers' Status

Incidentally, praise is due to the representatives of the Ministry of Finance and Education and Yaffa Ben-David, the Secretary General of the Teachers' Union, for reaching a salary agreement last year that greatly improves the salaries of teachers, especially new ones. They have thereby progressed in the right direction, encouraging young people's joining the educational system. The agreement stipulated an additional salary of about 1,500 shekels per month for new teachers, while the most veteran get less than 100 shekels more monthly. Thus, in practice, from next year a beginning teacher working as a homeroom teacher at full-time, will earn 10,000 shekels per month, while the most veteran will receive approximately 19,000 shekels for this work. This comes in addition to ample benefits, such as vacation pay, etc.

It is important to mention this, because many people think teachers' salaries are considerably lower than they actually are. Thus, young, idealistic people who would be willing to dedicate themselves to the sacred work of education prefer to pursue other professions, thinking they cannot support a family through teaching. The reality, though, is better.

Let's hope that the Teachers Union also acts in this spirit, caring especially for beginning teachers, because the gap between the veterans and the beginners is too vast (by international standards), and education's future depends on young people entering the field.

We should also hope that in the future, teachers' pay and status will continue rising, so that the best and most suitable candidates will join the educational system, since our future depends on it.

This is not a far-fetched hope, for it appears that as the years pass, practical and technological work will increasingly be done by computers, and the public will grasp that investing in education is most important, for it is through education that students become better, more moral, wiser, and more creative. This, of course, will also be reflected in the overall investment in the educational system, and rise in teachers' wages. Then, the Torah scholars among them, will also be able to serve as synagogue rabbis. "The finest to education"!

Rabbi Eliezer Melamed

Shabbat Shalom: Nitzavim-Vayeilech (Deuteronomy 29:9- 31:30)

By Rabbi Shlomo Riskin

Efrat, Israel – "For this commandment that I have commanded you today is not concealed from you, nor is it far away." (Deuteronomy 30:11)

How often it is that we and people we know say, "I can't help it. It's in my nature to get angry." Or, perhaps most commonly, "I give up. I'll never be able to go on a diet and keep the weight off." At this time of year, perhaps more than at any other time, we wrestle with issues such as these brought to our attention as a result of deep introspection.

The great 19th century scholar Rabbi Yisrael Salanter noted, "It is easier to learn the entire Talmud than to change one character trait." Indeed, can we change? Is a particular trait part and parcel of human nature, built into our personality, seemingly impossible to overcome?

Judaism, with its emphatic message of freedom of choice, insists on our ability to change. But is it really fair to ask individuals to do what may very well be beyond their ability to achieve? Do we really have the power to overcome our most potent and persistent weaknesses? To what extent can we take into account the human difficulty in overcoming one's weakness?

Our Torah portion, Nitzavim, emphatically insists on the possibility of change, no matter the circumstances: "I have set before you so that you will consider in your heart, among all the nations where the Lord your God has banished you. And you shall return to the Lord your God and obey His voice" (ibid., v. 1-2).

And once a person has begun the process of teshuva, God Himself – aware of the almost insuperable difficulty of changing one's nature and overcoming one's inherent weakness – steps in and completes the process on behalf of the penitent: "And the Lord your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your seed to love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul in order that you may live" (v.6).

From the perspective of the Holy Zohar, the mystical interpretation of the Bible, this is the difference between Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur. Rosh Hashana falls on the first day of the month of Tishrei, when the moon – a symbol of God's light and grace – is hidden and barely visible. The individual approaches the synagogue in fearful and trembling anticipation, hopeful but not at all certain that he can pierce through the veil of darkness covering the heaven and masking over the moon.

Ten days later, on Yom Kippur, the moon glows briefly, imbuing the heavens with renewed light and hope. The individual is then ecstatically reborn, cleansed, transformed, and purified by the grace of Divine love and forgiveness.

Indeed, we repeat again and again throughout the penitential prayers of the Day of Atonement the words of the prophet Ezekiel: "And I shall sprinkle upon you the purifying waters and you shall be purified...and I shall give you a new heart, and a new spirit shall I place in your midst" (36:25-26).

We can thus appreciate anew the enormous power of Yom Kippur, the one day during the year when the Almighty grants us not only forgiveness, but also the renewed inner strength to overcome our inborn weaknesses and foibles.

And we also may better understand the terse interpretation of Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Kotzk on the verse immediately following the

command – as well as our ability – to repent after one has transgressed: "For this commandment that I have commanded you today is not...far away from you" (ibid., 30:11). Says the Kotzker, "It requires only one small turn (Yiddish: nur ein kleine dreier)."

What he apparently meant was that the penitent is expected only to make a change in direction, to turn his back on his temptations and begin to embrace God and His Torah.

We return to our original question: can we change? The simple answer is yes. However, it is incumbent upon the would-be penitent making the all-important first step. At that point, the Almighty will give him a hand to help him complete the journey, as the Sages taught, "One who comes to be purified receives Divine assistance" (Talmud Yoma 38b).

And at the end of Yom Kippur, after a day of pleading with God for forgiveness and atonement, we cry out in the Ne'ila prayer: "Your right hand is extended to accept the penitent!", reminding us that when returning to God, we are never alone.

Shabbat Shalom

Writing a Sefer Torah

By Rabbi Yirmiyohu Kaganoff

Question #1: Double Torah?

Mr. Yoreish would like to know: "My late father owned a sefer Torah, which is now mine. Do I have a mitzvah to write another sefer Torah?"

Question #2: Special Birthday Present

"My father's friends want to surprise him with a very special birthday gift -- a sefer Torah. Someone told me that if they do this, my father will not fulfill the mitzvah of writing a sefer Torah. Is this true?"

Question #3: Torah Online

Encyclopedia Brownstein asks: "Now that anyone can purchase access to thousands of seforim online, am I required to purchase these services so that I can study from them?"

Introduction:

The last of the 613 mitzvos of the Torah, as counted by the Sefer Hachinuch, requires each male Jew to write a sefer Torah (Sanhedrin 21b). This is derived from the posuk, Ve'ata kisvu lochem es hashirah hazos velamdo es bnei Yisroel (Devorim 31:19), which is understood by Chazal to mean: "And now, write for yourself a sefer Torah that includes this song [that begins with the word Ha'azinu] and [with this Torah] teach the Children of Israel" (see Rambam, Hilchos Sefer Torah 7:1).

A sefer Torah must be written with utmost accuracy. There are myriads of laws that govern how the parchment must be prepared and how the letters and words must be written. Each word must be spelled exactly the way it is spelled in that place in our sifrei Torah, notwithstanding that certain letters, such as vav and yud, are at times included and in other places omitted. Extensive rules govern the spacing of the letters and words, and even how the parchments of the sefer Torah are sewn together.

The columns of the sefer Torah must be straight and neat, and the places that are to be written as poems, such as Az Yoshir and the song of Ha'azinu, must be written in a special way, which the Gemara (Megillah 16b) calls ari'ach al gabei leveinah, literally, "a half brick on top of a brick" -- the lines alternate in a pattern somewhat reminiscent of the way bricks are used in construction. If these poems are not written this way, the sefer Torah is not kosher (Shabbos 103b).

No Chapters

There are no chapter headings in a sefer Torah and no breaks to delineate the beginnings and ends of chapters or pesukim. Furthermore, a sefer Torah does not have any musical notes or signs, usually called taamei hamikra (in Hebrew) or trop (in Yiddish), to show the baal keriyah how to chant the passage. The only punctuation in the sefer Torah are two types of paragraph endings, one called pesuchah, literally, "open" and the other called sesumah, "closed." The Rambam and the Rosh disagree what is the correct way to demarcate these stops. Since a sefer Torah in which a pesuchah appears like a sesumah or vice versa is invalid (Shabbos 103b), this dispute complicates writing a sefer Torah that is kosher according to all opinions. To avoid this problem, the

accepted practice is that pesuchos or sesumos are never begun towards the end of a line or at its beginning. Since both the Rambam and the Rosh agree how to create a pesuchah or a sesumah that falls in the middle of a line, we always write sifrei Torah in such a way that all pesuchah or sesumah endings fall out this way. This is one of the reasons why sofrim use copies of a tikun or a photocopy of a sefer Torah to guarantee that the pesuchos and sesumos of the sefer Torah always end up in the middle of a line, which avoids the above-mentioned halachic dispute. (The dispute between the Rambam and the Rosh concerning how to make pesuchos and sesumos also affects the laws of how to write tefillin and mezuzos, but this is not our topic.)

Female Sofros

Women are exempt from the mitzvah of writing a sefer Torah, just as they are exempt from the mitzvah of studying Torah (Rambam; Sefer Hachinuch; however, see Shaagas Aryeh #35 who opines that women are obligated to write a sefer Torah. However, at the end of #36, the Shaagas Aryeh concludes that women are not obligated to write a sefer Torah, but for a different reason than that cited by the Rambam.) Most authorities rule that one cannot fulfill the mitzvah of writing a sefer Torah with one written by a woman (Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh Deah 281:3); however, Derishah (Yoreh Deah 281:1) concludes that one does fulfill the mitzvah with a sefer Torah written by a woman.

The King

The Jewish king is required to write or arrange the writing of an additional sefer Torah; aside from one that he wrote before he became king, he is required to write another sefer Torah after he becomes king (Sanhedrin 21b; Rambam, Hilchos Sefer Torah 7:2). His new sefer Torah is checked by the Beis Din Hagadol for accuracy by comparing it to the sefer Torah kept in the Beis Hamikdash that was written by Moshe Rabbeinu (Rambam, Hilchos Sefer Torah 7:2). The new sefer Torah follows him constantly, even when he eats and holds court (Rambam, Hilchos Sefer Torah 7:2). The only time it is not in his presence is when he sleeps, bathes or uses the comfort facilities (Rambam, Hilchos Sefer Torah 7:2). If the king had no sefer Torah before he became king, he writes two sifrei Torah.

Inherited a Torah

Mr. Yoreish would like to know: "My late father owned a sefer Torah, which is now mine. Do I have a mitzvah to write another sefer Torah?"

To quote the words of the Gemara: Even though someone's ancestors left a sefer Torah, it is a mitzvah to write one on his own (Sanhedrin 21b). The authorities disagree whether this means that one who inherited a sefer Torah did not fulfill the mitzvah, or whether it means that there is an additional mitzvah to write one's own sefer Torah, notwithstanding that owning the inherited sefer Torah fulfilled the mitzvah.

The Sefer Hachinuch explains that writing a new sefer Torah increases the number and availability of sifrei Torah, which is why the Torah requires everyone to write his own. Furthermore, it is usually easier and more enjoyable to study from a more recently written Torah. Owning one's own sefer Torah facilitates studying Torah – one who owns a sefer Torah may study it whenever he has time, since he does not need to find a sefer Torah that is not being used.

Writing It Yourself

Someone who hires a sofer to write a sefer Torah fulfills the mitzvah, although it is more praiseworthy for someone to write the sefer Torah himself (Sefer Hachinuch). One who purchases a sefer Torah... is like grabbing a mitzvah from the market. If he wrote it himself, the Torah treats it as if he himself received the Torah directly from Har Sinai. Rav Sheishes said: if he corrected even one letter, it is considered as if he wrote it (Menachos 30a). Thus, someone who hired a sofer to write a sefer Torah should have one letter left unwritten, which the donor writes himself, thereby fulfilling the mitzvah, as if he wrote the whole Torah. It is important to note that the letter should be left unwritten, or at least not written sufficiently to be kosher. Common practice is that the sofer writes an outline of the last letter and leaves for donors and honorees only to fill in the outline. However, the sefer Torah is kosher even when letters are merely outlined; therefore, halachically, the sofer completed

the sefer Torah, not the donor, who has therefore not fulfilled the mitzvah of writing the sefer Torah himself.

Special Birthday Present

At this point, let us should discuss one of our opening questions: My father's friends want to surprise him with a very special birthday gift -- a sefer Torah. Someone told me that if they do this, my father will not fulfill the mitzvah of arranging the writing of a sefer Torah. Is this true?

The question here is if receiving a Torah as a present is similar to inheriting a sefer Torah. According to all authorities, this is not the ideal way to fulfill the mitzvah of writing a sefer Torah, and, according to many, one does not fulfill it at all.

However, if the friends involved are careful, they can help their birthday boy fulfill his mitzvah. All they need to do is not complete the sefer Torah, but present it to him with one letter not yet written. If he can write the letter himself, he fulfills the mitzvah in its most optimal way. If he cannot, but he hires a sofer to write the last letter, he has certainly fulfilled the mitzvah. A third option is to have the sofer write the entire sefer but leave a letter incomplete in a way that it is not valid, and teach father how to connect the broken parts of the letter in a way that makes the letter, and thereby the sefer Torah, kosher.

Lost Torah

If someone's sefer Torah was lost or stolen, does he lose his mitzvah?

It is always tragic when a sefer Torah is stolen or damaged in a fire or flood. Our question is whether the owner of a sefer Torah that he can no longer use now becomes required again to fulfill the mitzvah of writing a sefer Torah. The question can be explained as follows: Is the mitzvah the writing of a Torah, or is it to be in possession of a Torah that one wrote (or arranged its writing)?

This question is the subject of a dispute among the later authorities (the Acharonim), some contending that once a person has written a sefer Torah, he has now fulfilled the mitzvah, even in the event that it was destroyed or lost afterwards, whereas others rule that, in such cases, the owner is required to write a new sefer Torah (Pischei Teshuvah, Yoreh Deah 270:3).

Donating a Torah

Most people who own sifrei Torah do not keep it in their homes, but, instead, lend it to a shul that uses it. Is it preferred that one loan the Torah to a shul or donate it?

Rabbi Akiva Eiger rules that one should not donate a sefer Torah to the community, because one thereby loses his mitzvah of owning a sefer Torah (quoting Toras Chayim Sanhedrin 21, also quoted in Pischei Teshuvah, Yoreh Deah 270:3). Rabbi Akiva Eiger understands that the mitzvah is to own the sefer Torah.

Selling a Sefer Torah

As a rule of thumb, one may not sell a sefer Torah, since it is an item of kedushah. This is true, even if one already owns many sifrei Torah.

There are a few exceptional situations in which one is permitted to sell a sefer Torah, such as to provide the means with which to study Torah or to get married. The Rema adds that one may sell a sefer Torah for pidyon shevuyim, to redeem captives.

It is forbidden to sell an old sefer Torah in order to use the money to purchase a new one. However, some authorities permit selling an old sefer Torah, if the new sefer Torah that one wishes is already written and available for immediate purchase. In this instance, these authorities permit one to sell the old sefer Torah and immediately hand over the money to purchase the new sefer Torah (Levush, quoted by Shach, Yoreh Deah 270:3). However, the Shach concludes that, even in this situation, it is forbidden to sell an old Torah in order to buy a new one. The dispute between the two opinions is whether one may sell an item of sanctity in order to purchase an item of equal sanctity.

When it is forbidden to sell an old Torah for a new one, it is similarly prohibited to sell a sefer Torah that one inherited in order to use the proceeds to be able to write or purchase a new one. The Chasam Sofer, who rules this way, reasons that since there is no increased kedushah in the new sefer Torah over the old one, there is no legitimate halachic basis to sell the old one (Shu"t Chasam Sofer, Yoreh Deah 254, quoted in Pischei Teshuvah, Yoreh Deah 270:6).

It would seem that if the old one is posul, it would be permitted to sell it to someone who will repair it and return it to use, in order to use the money to purchase a new kosher one. This is because the new one has greater kedushah than does the old one, which is posul.

Acquiring Other Seforim

Is the purpose of the mitzvah of owning a sefer Torah to make sure that one has works of Torah from which to study, or is the mitzvah simply that everyone should actually write his own sefer Torah? The Rosh (Halachos Katanos, Hilchos Sefer Torah, Chapter 1:1) writes that, since no one today uses a sefer Torah for studying, the mitzvah is the acquisition of seforim, such as chumashim, mishnayos, Gemaras, and their commentaries that are used for study. The Beis Yosef (Yoreh Deah, end of 270) explains that the Rosh does not mean that there is no longer a mitzvah of writing a sefer Torah. In the Beis Yosef's opinion, the Rosh also agrees that the primary mitzvah remains to write a sefer Torah. What the Rosh contends is that one fulfills the mitzvah also by acquiring seforim. This approach to understanding the Rosh is followed by several other early authorities (Levush; Bach; Tosafos Yom Tov).

However, the Tur implies that the Rosh means that there is no mitzvah today of writing a sefer Torah, and this approach is expressed explicitly by the Perishah. In their opinion, the mitzvah of writing a sefer Torah exists only to study from it, and when one will not use the sefer Torah for study, there is no mitzvah to write one, but, instead, the mitzvah is to acquire materials that will be used for Torah study. Notwithstanding the opinions of the Tur and the Perishah to the contrary, the Taz concludes that we should follow the Beis Yosef's understanding that writing a sefer Torah remains a requirement even today.

There is a third approach to explaining the view of the Rosh, that of the Shaagas Aryeh. He rejects the approach that the mitzvah of writing a sefer Torah exists only to study from it, but, rather, accepts the Beis Yosef's understanding that there is a mitzvah of writing the Torah for its own sake. The Shaagas Aryeh proves that this must be true because otherwise why, in the era of the Gemara, was someone who inherited a sefer required to write one, when he could have used his inherited Torah for study? This implies that there is a mitzvah of writing a sefer Torah, independent of the need to have means with which to study Torah.

The Shaagas Aryeh notes that the Gemara (Kiddushin 30a) states that we are no longer experts on the correct spelling of all the words in a sefer Torah. On this basis, the Shaagas Aryeh #36 rules that from the time when the amora'im of the Gemara realized that we no longer know the correct spelling of the Torah, we are not required min hatorah to write a sefer Torah, since we may be spelling some of the words incorrectly. However, at the time of the Gemara, there was still a rabbinic requirement to write a sefer Torah to make certain that there were enough sifrei Torah and seforim in existence for people to study. This rabbinic requirement existed as long as people still used sifrei Torah for study. The Rosh is contending that once sifrei Torah are no longer used for study, there is no mitzvah to write sifrei Torah but, instead, the rabbinic mitzvah becomes the acquisition of seforim with which to study.

At this point we can address the question raised above by Encyclopedia Brownstein: Now that one can purchase the ability to access thousands of seforim on the computer, am I required to purchase these services so that I can study from these seforim?"

It would seem to me that since one can purchase the materials he needs to study in the old, bound format, this is not required. However, if one feels that his study of Torah is hampered by not having access to all the seforim that one can now access via a computer, it would seem that Brownstein's suggestion may have merit. I'll leave this question for Encyclopedia to discuss with his posek.

Conclusion

According to all approaches we have cited, there is a correlation between the mitzvah of writing a sefer Torah, that of studying Torah, and the requirement to live the entirety of our lives according to Torah and within the parameters established by the Torah. Certainly, this is the most befitting way for the Torah to close its listing of the mitzvos: with

a mitzvah whose purpose is to sustain us, so that we conduct our lives in full accordance with the Torah's guidelines.

Drasha

By Rabbi Mordechai Kamenetzky

Parshas Netzavim

To Life!

Many difficult choices face us daily. Some are seemingly insignificant, and some are critical. Those choices require deep and careful analysis and we hope against hope that we make the correct decision. There is one choice, however, that any fool can make. It is the choice of life. Yet the Torah commands us this week that when faced with the choice of life or death it is incumbent upon us to choose life. "See — I have placed before you today the life and the good, and the death and the evil... and you shall choose life, so that you will live — you and your offspring." Deuteronomy 30:15-19

The Torah is filled with 613 Mitzvos. Each and every one of them is imparted to us with a sense of urgency. We are commanded to observe the minor laws with the same fervor as the major ones. Yet the Torah is not content with its charge to keep individual commandments. It culls all the laws under the title of "life" and then commissions us with an additional Mitzvah — "choose life." Isn't the objective of this command another angle in which we are again prodded to observe all that has already been commanded? Why does the Torah repeat its original charges as one summary command? Why aren't the original 613 sufficient?

It is fascinating to note that in the entire Torah there is no overt reference to Olam Haboh — the world to come. To scoffers, it holds another opportunity to dismiss one of the greatest tenets of Jewish Faith. There are only veiled allusions to our raison d'être the world of eternity. Why?

The entire Oral Law, Mishnah, Talmud, etc., is replete with the concept of the world to come. The Sages in Pirkei Avos, explain that, "this world is just a corridor for the world to come. One must prepare himself in the hallway before entering the palace." If this great world was offered orally, why is it not openly discussed in the text of the Torah? I once heard that the Torah, unlike other religious documents, is telling us, "I am not only promising to deliver a reward in a place you can't understand. If you fulfill my commandments, I promise reward in this very world!" Hashem guarantees reward in this world. The world to come will be beyond our comprehension but this world will hold more than enough gratification when we act in accordance with his will.

Reb Ahron Kotler of blessed memory, epitomized a life steeped in Torah study. After escaping the ravages of World War II, he established the Kollel (fellowship program) of Beth Medrash Govoah, at Lakewood, New Jersey. It is there that married scholars studied Torah day and night and received a small stipend. After two years of Kollel study one aspiring prodigy had a lucrative business opportunity in which he was guaranteed a very substantial living. He approached Reb Ahron. "Rebbe, is it true that if a businessman supports a Torah scholar in a contractual arrangement, then he shares the reward of the world to come with his partner? Reb Ahron answered in the affirmative, explaining the concept of Yissachar-Zevulun partnership. (Zevulun was a merchant and his brother, Yissachar, was a sage. They entered a business arrangement to share equally both financial and spiritual rewards.) "If that is the case," the student continued "I'd like to enter into an arrangement with a Kollel member. You see, Rebbe, I have a wonderful opportunity to make quite a bit of money and this way I'll still be guaranteed the world to come." Reb Ahron was stunned. "How can you leave learning?" The student responded meekly. "But won't I still enjoy the world to come?" "Of course!" exclaimed the Rosh Yeshiva, "but if you leave learning, how will you enjoy this world?"

Reb Ahron understood this week's Torah's message to its fullest extent. Observance of Mitzvos is not just a life of extended ritual observance. It is life itself. The Torah has laid a path that if followed precisely will guarantee years of happiness. It will guarantee the ability to overcome perceived suffering. It will guarantee a certain sense of fulfillment way

beyond any material gain. The Torah declares, “if you choose a life of Torah, you are not only selecting a set of rituals. You are choosing much more than Tefillin, Mezuzah and Shofar. You are choosing a sum total greater than all of its parts. You are choosing life!”

Good Shabbos

Mordechai Kamenetzky – Yeshiva of South Shore

Reb Ahron Kotler (1892-1962) was the Rosh Yeshiva of Kletzk, Poland. After his escape from Europe during World War II he established Beth Medrash Govoah in Lakewood New Jersey. Reb Ahron was a prime force in the establishment of the day school movement in America as well as a Torah Educational system in Israel.

Nitzavim-Vayeilech 5783

Rabbi Ben-Tzion Spitz

Tripartite Forgiveness (Nitzavim-Vayeilech)

God pardons like a mother, who kisses the offense into everlasting forgiveness. -Henry Ward Beecher

In one of Moses’ last speeches to Israel, he declares that “You are standing today, all of you, before your God.” The Bat Ayin on Deuteronomy 29:9 explains that when Moses is saying “today” he is referring to Rosh Hashana, the start of the Jewish calendar year.

The Bat Ayin then quotes a midrash from Vayikra Rabah 30:7 that states that God forgives the nation of Israel in three different stages. He forgives a third of our sins on the eve of Rosh Hashana, He forgives a second-third of our sins during the Ten Days of Repentance (from Rosh Hashana until Yom Kippur), and He forgives the third-third of our sins on Hoshana Rabbah (the penultimate day of Sukkot).

The Bat Ayin wonders as to the timing and significance of Rosh Hashana eve, the Ten Days of Repentance (which includes the High Holidays of Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur) and Hoshana Rabbah. He explains that each stage of forgiveness is for different types of sin. The first stage is for the sin of illicit relations. The second stage is for sins of theft. The third stage is for gossiping.

He elaborates that God first forgives the sin of illicit relations because He wants the world to start the new year with a clean slate in that department. There is something fundamental about the sin of illicit relations that otherwise prevents repentance in all other matters, both for the individual, but also for the world at large. That’s why it’s forgiven on the eve of Rosh Hashana.

During the Ten Days of Repentance, God forgives for the sin of theft, which is understood to be widespread. It is not only an absolution for bank robbers. It is for all types of theft, big and small. Whether it’s theft of money, theft of items, theft of time. It includes misappropriating someone’s investment of time, effort, resources, trust, confidence. How many times have we failed a friend or loved one? How many times did we “steal” their trust? How many times did we say we’d do something and didn’t do it – always for legitimate reasons, but we nonetheless proved that it wasn’t important enough for us. That too is a theft and is the main forgiveness God grants through the period of the High Holidays.

The final forgiveness is given on Hoshana Rabbah. The Kabbalists explain that it is the day when whatever decrees were written and signed during the High Holiday are finally sealed and delivered for the year, so to speak. And it is reserved for the most pervasive, perhaps the most rampant sin of all. Gossip. And God forgives us of this and of all these sins with just one simple condition (besides seeking forgiveness directly from the injured party where possible). Remorse. We must regret and feel remorse for these failings of character and make a serious, concerted effort to reduce if not outright remove these defects from our interpersonal relationships.

May we appreciate and take advantage of the fresh start and opportunities of a New Year.

Shabbat Shalom and Ktiva Ve’chatima Tova,
Ben-Tzion

Dedication

To the memory of Rabbi Charles Meisels z”l. May his family be comforted among the mourners of Zion and Jerusalem.

Parsha Insights

By Rabbi Yisroel Ciner

Parshas Netzavim

Can the Sun Just Not Rise?

This week we read Parshas Nitzavim, quickly followed by the holiday of Rosh Hashana two days later. In our parsha, on the last day of his life, Moshe gathers together all of Bnei Yisroel for a final initiation into the bris {covenant} with Hashem. He warns to be very vigilant with idol worship and describes the destruction Hashem will send upon Eretz Yisroel if we don’t follow the way of Hashem.

“Ha’e’dosi va’chem ha’yome es hashamayim v’es ha’aretz {I bring the heavens and earth as witnesses today} ha’chaim v’ha’mavess nasati l’fanecha ha’b’racha v’ha’k’lala {I have placed before you (the choice of) life and death, blessing and curse} u’va’charta ba’chaim {you should choose life} l’ma’an tich’ye atah v’zar’e’cha {in order that you and your children will live} [30:19].”

What testimony is being brought by the heavens and earth?

Rashi explains that, in the future, when evil will befall us, the heavens and earth will testify that we had been warned.

Rashi then quotes the Sifri which offers an additional explanation. Hashem is calling upon Bnei Yisroel: “Look at the heavens that I created to serve you, have they deviated from their prescribed path? Has the sun ever missed a day and not risen from the east to illuminate the world? Look at the earth that I created to serve you, has it ever deviated from its prescribed pattern? Have wheat seeds ever produced barley? If they who don’t receive reward or punishment haven’t deviated from their ordained paths, you Bnei Yisroel, who do receive reward for obeying and do get punished for transgressing, certainly should adhere to your ordained path.”

The Be’er Yosef is troubled by this Sifri. How can Hashem compare the roles of heaven and earth to that of man? The state and purpose of the heavens and earth has remained the same from the time of creation until today. They are supposed to be doing the same exact things day in and day out. Man’s obligations, on the other hand, are constantly changing from moment to moment depending on the situations in which he finds himself. Furthermore, based on this constant change of circumstances, there have been people through the generations who have claimed that since the world has changed, the Torah as we have it is no longer applicable...

He explains in the following way. Chaza”l reveal that the first word of the Torah — B’reishis {In the beginning}— alludes to the very purpose of creation. The world was created for the sake of the Torah that is called ‘reishis’ and for the sake of Yisroel who are also called ‘reishis’. Yisroel, through the instructions of the Torah, would fulfill the purpose of creation. The Torah was the blueprint through which the world was created. Every detail of the world was created in the precise way that it was, in order to create the proper environment in which the Torah would be fulfilled.

When we look at the heavens and earth, we must remember that they were created to enable us to serve Hashem. The fact that there has been no change in them is testimony that there has also been no change in the applicability of the Torah and in our ability to observe its teachings. The All-Knowing and Eternal G-d was well aware of all of the changes that the world would go through. The heavens and earth were summoned as testimony that the eternal Torah will always apply to us.

As the days of Rosh Hashana approach, we must keep in mind the second half of the passuk we quoted above: “I have placed before you (the choice of) life and death, blessing and curse — you should choose life! [30:19].”

The Akeidas Yitzchak illustrates this with a penetrating parable.

A certain king had three sons whom he wanted to appoint to prominent positions. However, the law of that country dictated that before a person could be appointed to such a rank, he had to have proven his wisdom. The king therefore advised his sons to travel for a few years, gather wisdom and then he’d summon them to return.

The three brothers set off. As they drew near to a distant island, they discerned an incredibly beautiful and elaborate orchard. They decided to drop anchor and to investigate. At the entrance of the orchard sat three men. One was a very old man. The second was a person who suffered from terrible bodily afflictions. The third, the wisest of the three, had a pure and brilliant glow emanating from his face.

As they were entering, each of these three men turned to them and offered advice. The first one told them: "Know that you cannot remain in the orchard forever." The second one warned them: "You can eat what you want but you can't take anything with you." The third one advised them: "When you eat from the fruits, stay away from the bad fruits — only choose the good ones."

Upon entering the garden, they were mesmerized by the sight and scent of magnificent plants, trees and flowers. As they continued in further, they came across beautiful fountains and springs which comprised a very elaborate irrigation system. The wisdom that had gone into the planning of this orchard was quite evident. As they continued even further, they came to different mines of gold and precious gems.

At first, the three brothers stayed together, enjoying the fruits and the beauty of the orchard. After a few days they split up with each involving himself in his particular interest. One became totally involved in the delicious fruits that were available there, spending his days eating and drinking. Another decided to involve himself in what he considered to be a more worthwhile pursuit and spent his days gathering gold and gems.

The third brother was not interested in the path of the other two. He instead spent his time delving into the wonders of this orchard. The more he probed, the clearer it became to him that incredible wisdom had gone into the planning and planting of this orchard. He began to search for some sign of who had made this orchard. He came across some texts written by the designer which further testified to the genius of that individual. He spent his days gathering as much wisdom as he could. He'd taste the different fruits and admire the gems but his energy was devoted to acquiring an understanding of the designer through understanding what he'd built.

Time passed and the awaited message came from their father, the king — it was time to return home. They hurried to leave the orchard and to begin their return voyage.

The first brother had become so accustomed to the sweet pleasures of the orchard that he was unable to live without them. He never made it back to his father's country.

The second son tried to carry out the fortune he had amassed. The heavy work and sleepless nights from his obsession with riches had taken their toll. He looked like a broken man, not like a prince. To add insult to injury, as he had been warned before he entered, all of the wealth that he tried to take with him was confiscated.

The third brother left filled with excitement. This was the day he was longing for. He could now show his father all the wisdom that he had gained.

The two remaining brothers reached the palace. The guards recognized the third brother and gave him a princely welcome. The second brother was unrecognizable and was not allowed to enter. The king sat with his son, delighted in the wisdom he had gained, and prepared a seat for him amongst the leading officers of the kingdom.

The three sons represent mankind being sent to this world. Upon arrival one receives three warnings. Adom Harishon warns him: You were formed from earth and to earth you will return. Iyov {Job} admonishes: You were born naked and that's how you'll return. Moshe exhorts: Choose life...

In the Rosh Hashana prayers we say: Remember us for life, O King Who desires (us to have) life and inscribe us in the Book of Life, for Your sake, O Living G-d.

In order to honestly ask Hashem for life, we must first make the decision to choose life.

Good Shabbos and a k'siva v'chasima tova,
Yisroel Ciner

This week's parsha-insights is dedicated in mazel tov to Howie Hershkovich and Martha Vays in honor of their upcoming wedding. May they be zocheh to much happiness together and to build a bayis ne'eman b'Yisroel.

Parshat Nitzavim

by Rabbi Yaakov Asher Sinclair - www.seasonsofthemoon.com

PARSHA OVERVIEW

On the last day of his life, Moshe gathers all the people, young and old, lowly and exalted, men and women, in a final initiation. The covenant includes not only those who are present, but even those generations yet unborn. Moshe admonishes the people again to be extremely vigilant against idol worship, because despite having witnessed the abominations of Egypt, there will always be the temptation to experiment with foreign philosophies as a pretext for immorality.

Moshe describes the desolation of the Land of Israel that will result from failure to heed Hashem's mitzvahs. Both their descendants and foreigners alike will remark on the singular desolation of the Land and its apparent inability to be sown or to produce crops. The conclusion will be apparent to all — that the Jewish People have forsaken the One Who protects them, in favor of powerless idols. Moshe promises, however, that the people will eventually repent after both the blessings and the curses have been fulfilled. And, however assimilated they will have become among the nations, Hashem will eventually bring them back to the Land of Israel. Moshe tells the people to remember that the Torah is not a remote impossibility, but rather that its fulfillment is within the grasp of every Jew. This Torah portion concludes with a dramatic choice between life and death, with Moshe exhorting the people to choose life.

PARSHA INSIGHTS

Stand Up and Be Counted

"You are standing today..." (29:9)

As modern culture seems to increasingly anesthetize the inherent morality of humanity, a Jew needs to stand up and be counted. As society at large is held to ransom by an autocracy of pseudo-intellectuals whose views are based on little more than their own virtue-signaling and a desperate scramble not to be seen as un-enlightened, we who champion the immutable values of the Torah need to stand up and be counted.

The Chafetz Chaim once said to Rabbi Shimon Schwab, "Do you know why I am a Kohen and you are not?" Rabbi Schwab said, "Because your father was a Kohen and your grandfather was a Kohen." "Okay, so why was my grandfather a Kohen?" Before waiting for Rabbi Schwab to answer, the Chafetz Chaim explained, "I am a Kohen because three and half thousand years ago, at the scene of the Golden Calf, when Moshe Rabbeinu called out, 'Who is for Hashem? To Me!' — my great-great-grandfather ran and heeded the call to be counted with Moshe and our holy Torah."

Today, how do we answer the call of "Who is for Hashem? To Me!" How do we stand up and be counted? When we stand bigger and stronger than temptation. When we turn our heads away, we heed the call.

When we do this, we experience a moment that is totally between us and Hashem, a private moment that no one else will ever know about. The Midrash says on the verse in Mishlei, "My son, give Me your heart and your eyes..." — "The Holy One says, 'If you give Me your heart and your eyes, I know that you are Mine.'"

When we guard our eyes, when we raise our eyes and minds from temptation and look to Hashem — He knows that we are His. We have answered the call of "Who is for Hashem? To Me!" We are standing up and are counted.

Office of the Chief Rabbi Mirvis

D'var Torah: Nitzavim Vayelech

What is the significance of every single letter of the Torah?

The Lubavitcher Rebbe gave a beautiful explanation. In Parshat Vayelech, which we'll be reading this coming Shabbat, the Torah

presents us with the last of the Mitzvot. Mitzvah number 613 states “וְעַתָּה כְּתֹבוּ לָכֶם אֶת־הַשִּׁירָה־הַזֹּאת וְלַמָּוֶדָה אֶת־בְּנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל שִׁירָה בְּפִיהֶם” – and now, write for yourselves this song, which is the Torah, and teach it to the children of Israel. Place it in their mouths”.

Why is there a mitzvah to write a Sefer Torah? We can fulfil this Mitzvah by writing just one letter of a Sefer Torah and it’s attributed to us as if we’ve written the whole Sefer. But why this imperative to be engaged in the writing of letters of the scroll?

The Rebbe explained, there is a Halacha which we learn from the Gemara in Mesechet Meachot, Daf 29a. There Chazal tell us that all the letters must be “גויל מוקף – surrounded by blank parchment”. That is to say that no letter can be connected to any other letter. At the same time there is also a Halacha that each letter must be visibly part of its own word – and visibly separate from all other words.

Each letter represents an individual. The message of the letters of the Torah, is that each one of us should know that we are unique people. As a result, everyone should respect our own individuality, our unique nature and personality. At the same time, none of us should ever forget that we are an integral part of our nation and as a result, we have an ‘areivut’ – a responsibility, to selflessly care for others and reach out to them.

In addition, if one single letter of the Torah is ‘passul’ – rendered unfit, then the entire Sefer Torah is passul. From here we learn that if there is something with just one of us, then every single one of us is affected as a result.

This is such a beautiful message for us and so apposite on the eve of the commencement of Slichot – a time when we’re just about to usher in a new year and when we’re engaging in ‘Cheshbon Hanefesh’ – introspection.

At this time, therefore, let us never forget how important each and every one of us is and how we should develop ourselves and excel in our own personal way as individuals. At the same time, we should never forget that everybody depends on us and is looking for us to pull our weight for the sake of our nation and for the sake of the world.

Shabbat Shalom

Parshas Nitzavim-Vayeilech

Rabbi Yochanan Zweig

This week’s Insights is dedicated in loving memory of Reuven ben Shaul.

Nation Corporation

You are standing here today, all of you, before Hashem your God; your heads, your tribes, your elders, and your officers – all of Yisroel (29:9).

This week’s parsha opens with Moshe Rabbeinu addressing all of Bnei Yisroel. Rashi (ad loc) explains that this was the last day of his life and Moshe was “standing” for all of the people, i.e. permanently affixing Bnei Yisroel into a new covenant with Hashem. Moshe goes on to list all the different entities bound by this covenant (leaders, elders, officers, all the men, women, children, converts, etc.) and then adds “whoever is here standing with us today [...] and those that are not here today” (29:14). Rashi (ad loc) explains that this is referring to all future generations (that they too are to be bound by this covenant).

What is the nature of this new covenant? Furthermore, as the Maharal (Gur Aryeh 29:14) asks, “How is it possible to bind all future generations to it as well?” In other words, how does my oath obligate succeeding generations so that if they don’t follow the terms of the covenant they will be punished?

At the end of last week’s parsha Moshe Rabbeinu spoke to the entire nation as a whole, however, in this week’s parsha Moshe begins by creating an entire infrastructure. What changed?

Until now, Bnei Yisroel was an association of tribes and families under the leadership of Moshe Rabbeinu. On the last day of his life, Moshe established the Jewish people as a corporate entity. Just as companies have individuals with different roles, so too Moshe created a hierarchy of leadership and responsibility.

In other words, the Jewish people were no longer just an associated group of people united by Moshe, but became a single entity with

responsibility for each other and towards each other. Maimonides (Yad Hilchos Krias Shema 1:4) quotes a verse from this week’s parsha to illustrate that the unity of God is dependent on its acceptance by the entirety of the Jewish people. To understand this on a deeper level: Everything in creation is a reflection of Hashem; thus the concept of the oneness of Hashem is articulated by the harmony and indivisibility of the Jewish people.

At this point the Jewish people are now viewed as a single entity, a corporate body, as it were. Just as within a body when one area is injured or incapacitated it affects the entirety of the body, so too we all affect each other. Rashi (29:28) explains that with this covenant we became guarantors for one another and thus we can be punished for the misdeeds of our brethren. Rashi ascertains this from the Gemara (Sanhedrin 27b), which states that Bnei Yisroel were made guarantors for one another.

On the surface, this guarantee is hard to understand. First, there is no consideration here, how is this a legally binding guarantee? Second, a guarantor is only responsible for monetary restitution; a guarantor cannot be physically punished for another’s misdeeds.

The word that the Gemara uses is that the Jewish people are guarantors one with another – “עֲרֻבִים זֶה בָּזֶה” (as opposed to one to another – “עֲרֻבִים זֶה לָזֶה”). This is also borne out by the word “ערב”, which means blended (e.g. this is how a community “eruv” works, we are a blended whole and therefore permitted to carry). Thus, this law of being a guarantor is similar to a person’s body, when one leg doesn’t work properly then the other leg compensates. This obligation to guarantee or pay is because we are one unified, whole nation.

This is also why succeeding generations can be held responsible for the covenant. They are simply the next generation of cells in the ever-evolving corporate body of the Jewish people – an eternally unified nation.

Bringing Torah Down to Earth

I am a hundred and twenty years old today; I can no longer go out and come in, and Hashem has told me you shall not cross this Jordan (31:2).

This week’s parsha opens with Moshe addressing all of Bnei Yisroel on the last day of his life. Rashi (ad loc) explains “I can no longer go out and come in” as referring to “[going out and coming] in the words of the Torah. This teaches us that the knowledge handed down and the wellsprings of wisdom had become closed to him.”

This means that on the last day of his life Moshe was no longer “connected” to the source of the Torah and its wisdom. The question is, why? Why was it necessary for Moshe to be closed off to the wisdom and wellsprings of Torah on the last day of his life?

In last week’s parsha we find a remarkable statement, “This commandment that I command you today is not hidden from you and it is not distant. It is not in the heavens [for you] to say, ‘who will go up to the heavens and bring it down for us [...]’” (30:11-12). While many commentators (Ramban ad loc etc.) understand this verse to be referring to the mitzvah of repentance, Rashi (ad loc) explains that this is referring to the Torah itself. Meaning if it was up in the heavens someone “would have to go up after it, and learn it” (Rashi 30:12).

What does Rashi mean by, “if the Torah was up in the sky somebody would have to ascend after it and study it to bring it down”?

Here we learn a fascinating lesson about our Torah: So long as Moshe was alive the Torah was literally in the heavens. That is, the domain of Torah remained with Hashem and his heavenly court. Moshe was “connected” to the source. He had learned all the mitzvot and the deep meanings that Hashem intended for us to know. If there was a question as to what the proper course of action Hashem wanted from us, we merely had to ask Moshe. If Moshe was unclear (like in the story of the person who gathered wood on Shabbos) or if he forgot a halacha (such as in the case of the daughters of Tzelaphchad) Moshe could go directly to Hashem to clarify.

On the last day of his life the Torah was gifted to the Jewish people. The Torah became our domain. Our sages were now the final authority as to what the proper halacha was in any given situation. Therefore, even if Hashem disagreed with the sages’ interpretation, we would still follow

their interpretation (see the Talmudic dispute between R' Eliezer and the other sages wherein Hashem seemingly sides with R' Eliezer but we follow the ruling of the sages, Talmud Bavi Baba Metzia 59b).

On the last day of his life Moshe finished writing the entire Torah and gave it to the Jewish people (see 31:9). In order for him to properly give over the Torah, so that it could become the domain of Bnei Yisroel (and no longer in the heavens), Moshe could no longer have access to the secrets and wellsprings of the Torah. Thereby, on Moshe's final day, the Torah became wholly ours, and our responsibility to properly define.

[Rav Frand - Parshas Netzavim - No Excuse Not To "Do Teshuvah"]

Thu, Sep 7, 5:11 PM (8 hours ago)

Rabbi Yissocher Frand

Parshas Netzavim - No Excuse Not To "Do Teshuvah"

This dvar Torah was adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Tapes on the weekly portion: Tape # 385, Fasting On Rosh Hashana. Good Shabbos!

According to the standard order of the weekly parshios, Parshas Nitzavim is always read before Rosh HaShana. Despite the fact that our current order of reading the parshiyos is not necessarily the way that it was always practiced, there could be no more appropriate parsha to read at precisely this time of year. Nitzavim contains the following series of pesukim (verses):

"For this mitzvah that I am prescribing to you today is not too wondrous for you, it is not too distant. It is not in Heaven that you should say 'Who shall go up to Heaven and bring it to us so that we can hear it and keep it?' It is not over the sea so that you should say 'Who will cross the sea and get it for us, so that we will be able to hear it and keep it?' It is something that is very close to you. It is in your mouth and in your heart, so that you can keep it." (Devarim 30:11-14)

There is a difference of opinion among the early commentators as to which mitzvah the Torah is referring. According to the Ramban (1194-1270) and others who follow his opinion, the Torah is referring to the mitzvah of Teshuvah (Repentance, Return to G-d). Teshuvah is this mitzva that is "within our capacity and within our reach to fulfill."

The Sforno (1470-1550) writes as follows concerning this pasuk: "It is not too wondrous for you" – that you would require neviim (prophets). "It is not too distant" – that you would require distant wise men of the generation to explain to you that which is necessary to accomplish it, even while you are still in exile."

A person should not think, "In these times, I am incapable of doing Teshuvah. Had I lived in the times of the neviim who could have directly told me exactly what I was doing wrong – then I could have repented properly. Unfortunately, I live in a period of history when there are no neviim." To counteract such thoughts, the Torah assures us "It is not in Heaven" – implying that we do not need prophetic words from heaven to allow us to do Teshuva. This is no excuse.

Likewise, we cannot argue "If I had a real maggid mussar (expounder of homiletic lessons of chastisement) then I might be inspired to repent. If

the Chofetz Chaim or the Vilna Gaon were here and would tell me to do Teshuvah, I would do it!" To counteract such thoughts, the Torah informs us "It is not across the Sea." This, too, is no excuse.

"For the matter is very near. It is within your mouth and your heart to do it." We do not need neviim or wise men. It is all up to us. This pasuk is a double-edged sword. Teshuvah is easy. It is accessible. But, on the other hand, it is completely up to us. We cannot fall back on external excuses.

Perhaps this is hinted at in the famous Gemara (Avodah Zarah 17a) regarding Eleazar ben Durdaya. When the woman of ill repute told Eleazar ben Durdaya that he would never be able to repent, he pleaded "Heaven and Earth request mercy for me." They responded that they could not help him. He invoked the aid of the stars and of the sea and was given the same answer. The Gemara says that he put his head between his knees and he expired on the spot as a result of intense remorse and repentance. What is the symbolism of placing his head between his knees? This was the ultimate acknowledgment that his repentance was dependent upon himself alone.

We cannot wait for others to do Teshuvah for us and we cannot blame others for our failure to do Teshuvah. It is not because our parents raised us poorly. It is not because our environment was bad. There are no excuses! The ability to do Teshuvah is within our own mouths and hearts.

Transcribed by David Twersky; Seattle, Washington. Edited by Dovid Hoffman; Yerushalayim.

This week's write-up is adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissochar Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Series on the weekly Torah portion. A listing of the halachic portions for Parshas Nitzavim / Vayeilech is provided below:

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PARSHAT VA'YELECH

Were we all at Ma'amad Har Sinai? According to "pshat," only the generation that left Egypt was granted this privilege. According to the popular Midrash, however, the "neshama" [soul] of every Jew, of every generation, witnessed that momentous event.

In this week's shiur, as we study Parshat Va'yelech, we will show how the mitzvah of HAKHEL helps 'bridge this gap' between "pshat" & "drash."

INTRODUCTION

Our study of Sefer Devarim thus far has focused on the centrality of Moshe Rabeinu's main speech (chapters 5->26), which details the mitzvot that Bnei Yisrael must keep in the Land. In our shiur on Parshat Nitzavim, we discussed how Moshe Rabeinu's final speech (i.e. chapters 29->30) forms a most appropriate conclusion for that main speech.

At this point in Sefer Devarim, i.e. as Moshe has completed his address, we would expect to find some concluding remarks and thus bring Sefer Devarim to a close. Sure enough, this is exactly what happens in the opening section of Parshat Va'yelech. Moshe Rabeinu first bids farewell by explaining why he can no longer lead (see 31:2), then introduces his successor - Yehoshua (see 31:3-8), and finally presents the written version of the Torah (whose mitzvot he has just completed teaching) to the Leviim and elders.

This indeed would have been an appropriate conclusion.

However, the next section (see 31:10-13) - the mitzvah of HAKHEL - i.e. the commandment to read the Torah in public once every seven years on the holiday of Succot - seems glaringly out of place. Did we not already finish listing all the mitzvot? Did Moshe not just write down the 'final' version of the Torah and present it to the Leviim? Would it not have made more sense to include the mitzvah of HAKHEL somewhere in Parshat Re'ay, together with all the other mitzvot relating to "haMAKOM ashe yivchar Hashem"?

[Note 31:11! see shiur on Parshat Re'ay. (Pay particular attention to 16:12-16.)]

To understand why the mitzvah of HAKHEL is recorded specifically at this time, we must return to Parshat Ki-tavo (and to Sefer Shmot) to uncover the underlying relationship between mitzvot HAKHEL and the events at Ma'amad Har Sinai.

FROM BRIT SINAI TO BRIT HAR EIVAL

Recall from Parshat Ki-tavo that immediately upon the completion of his main speech, Moshe instructs Bnei Yisrael to gather on Har Eival on the 'day they cross the Yarden' (see chapters 27->28). Here they were to:

- a) write down the mitzvot of Sefer Devarim, to be read and taught to Bnei Yisrael (see 27:1-4,8);
- b) erect a "mizbayach" & offer OLOT & SHLAMIM /see 27:5-7
- c) conduct a covenantal ceremony including the public reading of the "tochacha" (see 27:11-28:69).

It is important to note the fundamental difference between the "tochacha" and the main speech of Sefer Devarim. The main speech describes the MITZVOT which Bnei Yisrael must keep upon entering the Land, while the "tochacha" describes Bnei Yisrael's REWARD should they OBEY these mitzvot and their PUNISHMENT should they DISOBEY. [This can help us understand why the "tochacha" FOLLOWS the main speech]

To understand the reason for this additional "brit" on Har Eival, let's consider the parallel between this ceremony and that which

took place at Har Sinai forty years earlier (see Shmot 24:3-11). There (as well), we find that Moshe:

- a) writes down the laws and reads them to the nation;
- b) erects a "mizbayach" and offers OLOT & SHLAMIM;
- c) conducts a covenantal ceremony.
[Note that a "tochacha" was presented at Har Sinai, as well, as recorded in Parshat Bchukotei - see Vayikra 26:3-46. See also Chizkuni's explanation of "sefer ha'brit" in Shmot 24:7!]

Considering that the vast majority of the people of this new generation (i.e. those who are about to enter the Land) were not present at the original ceremony, this **new** generation must 'relive' the HAR SINAI experience. Since it will now become their duty - to fulfill the destiny originally planned for their parents' generation - they too must undergo a similar experience.

[Note: In Sefer Yehoshua we find many other parallels between "dor yotzei mitzrayim" and "dor knisa la'aretz," most probably for the very same reason. See end of chapter 8.]

FROM HAR EIVAL TO HAKHEL

For a similar reason, we can explain the reason for recording the mitzvah of HAKHEL in Parshat Va'yelech. Needless to say, the covenant of Sinai is binding for all generations (see 29:12-14). Nevertheless, just as it was necessary to 'recreate' that experience forty years later for the new generation on Har Eival, the mitzvah of HAKHEL will recreate that experience for all future generations. Once every seven years, Am Yisrael must 'relive' MA'AMAD HAR SINAI as the men, women, and children gather at the Beit HaMikdash on Chag ha'Succot for a public celebration to hear the Torah. The Torah will be read in public (see 31:9-13) just as it was at Har Sinai (see Shmot 24:4-7), and just as it was at Har Eival (see 27:3,8).

This interpretation is supported by the Torah's explicit reason for the mitzvah of HAKHEL:

"HAKHEL ET HA'AM - Gather together the nation, the men, the women, and the children... in order that they HEAR and in order that they will LEARN and fear their God, and they will faithfully keep all the words of this TORAH. And their children WHO DO NOT KNOW [i.e. those who were not at the last ceremony] will listen and learn to fear God, for all of the days that they are alive on the land which you are now crossing to inherit." (31:12-13)

OLOT & SHLAMIM - ALIYAH LA'REGEL

However, for our parallel to be complete, we would expect to find a mitzvah to offer korbanot of OLOT & SHLAMIM - just as was the case at Har Sinai and Har Eival. Why don't we find them in the Torah's commandment of HAKHEL?

One could suggest that this relates to the timing of HAKHEL - on SUCCOT. Recall that on SUCCOT every individual is obligated to offer OLOT and SHLAMIM to fulfill the mitzvah of "aliyah l'regel" (see 16:16-17 and Mesechet Shkalim).

Therefore, by performing this mitzvah on Succot at the Beit HaMikdash, the element of korbanot of OLOT & SHLAMIM is present, and our parallel to Ma'amad Har Sinai is complete. [Recall as well our shiur Parshat Terumah that expalined why the Mishkan/Mikdash itself is simply a model (and perpetuation) of Ma'amad Har Sinai!]

WHY HERE?

With this background, we can explain why Moshe orders the mitzvah of HAKHEL specifically now as he presents the Leviim and the elders the 'official copy' of the Torah. The mitzvah of HAKHEL is not 'just another mitzvah' in Sefer Devarim - it relates to the entire sefer! The purpose of this mitzvah is to periodically remind Bnei Yisrael of their obligation to keep ALL the mitzvot of Sefer Devarim, which Moshe had just finished teaching. Therefore, it is given when the Sefer itself is given over the Leviim for 'safe-keeping'.

[I]y'h, in next week's shiur we will explain why this mitzvah is followed by the SHIRA.]

A PARALLEL PURPOSE

The need to periodically teach these mitzvot at a NATIONAL gathering emphasizes yet another significant aspect of Matan Torah. The ultimate purpose of the mitzvot of Sefer Devarim is not only to enable each individual to develop his own, personal relationship with God, but also to create an "am kadosh" (a holy nation) in the Land of Israel - a nation that can properly represent God to the other nations.

This perspective is supported by yet another textual parallel between the mitzvah of HAKHEL and the description of "Ma'amad Har Sinai," as depicted earlier in Sefer Devarim (4:5-14). Precisely in the same 'parshia' where Sefer Devarim explains the ultimate, national purpose for keeping these mitzvot, we find a parallel description of Ma'amad Har Sinai:

"See, I have taught you 'chukim & mishpatim'... for you to keep in the Land which you are about to enter and conquer. Keep them and do them, for they are the proof of your wisdom and discernment IN THE EYE OF THE NATIONS, who, upon hearing these laws, will say... For what a great nation that has God so close to it... and what great nation has laws and rules as perfect as this Torah..." (4:5-8)

That parsha then continues with a commandment not to forget Ma'amad Har Sinai:

"But take utmost care ... NOT TO FORGET the things you saw with your own eyes and so that they do not fade from your memory as long as you live, and MAKE THEM KNOWN TO YOUR CHILDREN AND CHILDREN'S CHILDREN - The DAY YOU STOOD BEFORE GOD AT HAR CHOREV ("ma'amad har Sinai") when Hashem told me GATHER THE PEOPLE TOGETHER that I may let them hear my words... (4:9-11)

Now we will study this parallel - using transliterated Hebrew - by carefully reading the psukim concerning Har Sinai & Hakhel [note the repetition of several key words]:

AT HAR SINAI (4:10-12):

"yom asher amad'ta lifnei Hashem Elokecha b'Chorev b'emor Hashem alei HAK'HEL LI ET HA'AM v'ASH'MI'EIM et dvarei asher YIL'M'DUN L'YIRAH oti KOL HA'YAMIM, asher heym CHAYIM AL HA'ADAMA v'et B'NEIHEM y'LAMEIDUN."

AT HAK'HEL (31:12-13):

"HAK'HEL ET HA'AM, ha'anashim v'ha'nashim v'hataf ... l'maan YISHM'U ul'maan YIL'M'DU v'YA'RU et Hashem.... u'B'NEIHEM asher lo ya'du, YISHM'U v'LAM'DU l'YIRAH et Hashem KOL HA'YAMIM asher atem CHAYIM AL HA'ADAMA."

[It is easier just to compare them by yourself in the actual Hebrew.]

Similarly, the Torah in Devarim 18:16 refers to the day of Matan Torah as Yom ha'KAHAL. [Note also "k'halchem" in 5:19.]

Both these textual and thematic parallels point to a clear connection between the mitzvah of HAKHEL and Ma'amad Har Sinai.

JEWISH CONTINUITY

This background in "pshat" can possibly help us better understand the Midrash that every Jewish "neshama" was present at Ma'amad Har Sinai. One could explain that as members of the Jewish nation and our shared eternal destiny, each and every one of us was indeed present at Har Sinai. Nonetheless, to impress upon each new generation the importance of Ma'amad Har Sinai, there remains a need to recreate that experience (ideally through the mitzvah of HAKHEL).

Today, in the absence of the Beit Ha'Mikdash, we cannot fulfill the mitzvah of HAKHEL. Nevertheless, we can still utilize our 'Tishrei gatherings' [in 'shul' - the "mikdash m'at"] on Rosh Ha'shana, Yom Kippur, and Succot to help achieve (at least partially) the important goals of HAKHEL - at both the individual and national levels.

shabbat shalom,
menachem

FOR FURTHER IYUN

A. Note the opening and closing psukim of Sefer KOHELET. Based on those psukim, can you find a conceptual relationship between Sefer KOHELET and the mitzvah HAKHEL? [Keep in mind Devarim 31:12-13!]

Does this help explain our minhag to read sefer Kohelet on the shabbat of Succot?

Can you find a relate Sefer Kohelet to the time of year of Succot?

B. Review the HAKHEL psukim again and pay attention to the emphasis on "yirat Shamayim." Compare this emphasis with the purpose of Ma'amad Har Sinai as described by Moshe himself in Shmot 20:17. Notice the two distinct functions Moshe mentions. How does the element of "nasot etchem" come into play at HAKHEL? Compare Rashbam's interpretation with the Rambam's comments towards the end of Hilchot Chagiga 3:6 ("l'chazek dat ha'emet").

Additionally, see Dvarim 14:23. Could "ma'aser sheni" serve as a "miniature" form of HAKHEL? [See Ramban 14:22 and Rashbam 14:23.]

C. The m'forshim offer different bases for the relationship between HAKHEL and shmitta. Of particular interest to us is that of Rav Dovid Tzvi Hoffman, who compares the cessation of agricultural work during shmitta to the wilderness, which he views as the perfect setting for the preparations for Matan Torah. Note the machloket among the m'forshim on Chumash as to whether Hakhel takes place at the beginning or end of the shmita year, and the various reasons given therefor.

How does this relate to the parallel to Har Sinai?

Relate to the fact that if one was not permitted to work his field for an entire year (during shemittah), it was likely that he could dedicate that year to Torah study.

D. The Torah requires that specifically the melech read the Torah in public at Hakhel. Suggest various reasons based on the content of Sefer Devarim that would explain this halacha.

E. According to 'pshat,' it would appear that the Sefer Torah that Hashem commands to be placed next to the Aron is only Sefer Devarim. Note the machloket rishonim on this topic (see 31:9 & 31:24-26).

[Be sure to see at least Ramban.]

1. Try to explain the reason for this machloket.

2. Why is this Torah placed next to the Aron? What does the Aron contain?

3. As usual, relate this to the shiurim thus far on Sefer Dvarim.

F. Based on the above shiur, why do you think the Rambam records the halachot of Hakhel in Hilchot Chagiga rather than Hilchot Shmita & Yovel?

Parshas Netzavim Vayeilech: Dimensions of Teshuvah

By Rabbi Yitzchak Etshalom

I. PARASHAT HAT'SHUVAH

The second half of Parashat Nitzavim (small as it is) focuses on national introspection and the consequent movement of religious renaissance – all of which will take place, the Torah (promises? – see Rambam, MT T'shuvah 7:5) (commands? – see Ramban on v. 11) us, as a result of our having experienced all of God's blessings AND curses:

1) When all these things have happened to you, the blessings and the curses that I have set before you, if you call them to mind among all the nations where Hashem your God has driven you, 2) and you shall/will return to Hashem your God and hearken to His voice, just as I command you today, you and your children, with all of your heart and all of your soul 3) then Hashem your God will restore your fortunes and have compassion on you, gathering you again from all the peoples among whom Hashem your God has scattered you. 4) Even if you are exiled to the ends of the world, from there Hashem your God will gather you, and from there he will bring you back. 5) Hashem your God will bring you into the land that your ancestors possessed, and you will possess it; he will make you more prosperous and numerous than your ancestors. 6) Moreover, Hashem your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your descendants, so that you will love Hashem your God with all your heart and with all your soul, in order that you may live.

7) Hashem your God will put all these curses on your enemies and on the adversaries who took advantage of you.

8) *v'Atah Tashuv v'Shama'ta b'Kol Hashem* (Then you shall again hearken to the voice of Hashem) , observing all his commandments that I am commanding you today,

9) and Hashem your God will make you abundantly prosperous in all your undertakings, in the fruit of your body, in the fruit of your livestock, and in the fruit of your soil. For Hashem will again take delight in prospering you, just as he delighted in prospering your ancestors,

10) when you obey Hashem your God by observing his commandments and decrees that are written in this book of the law, because you turn to Hashem your God with all your heart and with all your soul.

11) Surely, this commandment that I am commanding you today is not too hard for you, nor is it too far away.

12) It is not in heaven, that you should say, "Who will go up to heaven for us, and get it for us so that we may hear it and observe it?"

13) Neither is it beyond the sea, that you should say, "Who will cross to the other side of the sea for us, and get it for us so that we may hear it and observe it?"

14) For the matter is very near to you; it is in your mouth and in your heart for you to observe. (D'varim 30:1-14)

[Note: In this shiur, we will examine the problem raised by the "sequence of events" in this parashah. I hope to send out a special shiur for Yom haKippurim which will reexamine this parashah, focusing on a different set of issues.]

II. THE "SECOND TESHUVAH"

There are, of course, many deep and profound concepts embedded in this parashah. There is, however, a problem of "sequence" in this section the resolution of which will, hopefully, provide us with a greater understanding of the phenomenon of Teshuvah.

Following the order of events as outlined in the parashah:

1) We will reflect on the fulfillment of the blessing and curse – at that point, we will be spread out and (we assume) under foreign rule among the nations. (v. 1)

2) We will return "until" (Heb. *Ad*) God, listening to His voice (v. 2) – we assume that this refers to the process of "Teshuvah" – return/repentance, including a recommitment to observing Torah and Mitzvot.

3) God will restore our fortunes, returning us back to our Land from all corners of the diaspora (vv. 3-5)

4) God will purify our hearts to worship Him completely (v. 6)

5) God will curse our enemies (v. 7)

6) We will commit to observance (???) (v. 8)

7) God will make us prosper and take delight in us (v. 9)

The obvious problem with this sequence is Step #6 – the “repetition” of the promise/command that we will return to God. Since the “return” (which is the premise of the whole parashah) is presented in v. 2 as the result of our introspection while in exile – and is the cause of our return to former glory and God’s favor, what is the meaning of this second “return”?

III. S’FORNO’S ANSWER

As we have done before, we turn to Rabbenu Ovadiah S’forno for help. In his commentary to Sefer D’varim, S’forno suggests that the phrase *v’Atah Tashuv* in v. 8 is not to be understood as “you will return”, following the general theme of the parashah (open the original and note how many times that root is used in this parashah).

Rather, he explains that this occurrence of the word means “you will be at peace”, as in the verse: *b’Shuvah vaNahat Tivash’un* – (you shall triumph by stillness and quiet) (Yeshaya 30:15).

In other words, the promise of the “second Teshuvah” is not about commitment born of reflection – which is the Teshuvah in v. 2. Rather, it is a promise that after we recommit to God, and God restores us and our fortunes, defeating our enemies – at that point, we will be able to hearken to God’s voice and fulfill His Mitzvot in a calm and secure manner.

This works well within the sequence, since we are promised that God will “circumcise our hearts” just before this “second Teshuvah”. As Ramban explains (in his comments on v. 6), this “circumcision of the hearts” means that we will no longer be tempted to abandon our commitment to God or our intimate relationship with Him.

At that point, following S’forno’s explanation, we will move from the stirring, revolutionary movement of Teshuvah (upending our lives, in feeling, action and, ultimately, in geographic location and political reality) into a calm stasis of Mitzvah-observance.

This comment is most enlightening – but, as might be expected, there is room to challenge. There are two “technical” problems with this explanation of “Tashuv”.

a) The verb root *Sh*W*B, as mentioned earlier, shows up so often (7 times) in these 14 verses that it might almost be called anthemic of this parashah. To suggest that in this one instance it means something different – almost diametrically opposite – of the meaning ascribed in the other occurrences is not an easy theory to accept.

b) Although the noun “shuva”, meaning “calm” does show up in Tanakh, we have no instance of this root used as a verb to mean anything but “return”. S’forno’s prooftext is, therefore, an incomplete proof (to say the least).

IV. A NEW RESOLUTION: TWO STEPS IN THE TESHUVAH PROCESS

If we could find a way to maintain the meaning “return” in our verse, yet explain this “second Teshuvah” in a way that makes sense sequentially, we would both solve our problem and avoid the linguistic challenge to S’forno’s comment.

In order to explain this, we have to look back to the first instance of Teshuvah mentioned in the parashah – v. 2. Let’s compare the two verses:

FIRST TESHUVAH (v. 2) *v’Shav’ta ‘ad Hashem Elohekha v’Shama’ta b’Kolo* (you shall/will return to Hashem your God and hearken to His voice), just as I command you today, you and your children, with all of your heart and all of your soul.

SECOND TESHUVAH (v. 8) *v’Atah Tashuv v’Shama’ta b’Kol Hashem* (Then you shall *Tashuv* and hearken to the voice of Hashem), observing all his commandments that I am commanding you today...

If we look carefully at the first instance of Teshuvah, we note that there is no direct commitment to Mitzvot mentioned – just a readiness to “hearken to the Voice of God”. What does this phrase mean?

There is a wide range of circumstances that could conceivably cause someone – or a nation – to want to return to God. As outlined in the premise of our parashah (v. 1), the cause outlined here is the fulfillment of God's blessings and curses. The nation will look at the events which have transpired and will understand that it is their distance from God which has led them realize the awful curses – just as their intimacy with God was the source of those blessings they had previously enjoyed. Indeed, the Torah tells us that the people will say: "Surely it is because our God is not in our midst these evils have befallen us" (D'varim 31:17). The awareness of that "distance" (known as "Hester Panim" – the "hiding of the Divine countenance"), coupled with a realization of the terrible circumstances in which the nation is enveloped, will lead to a resolve to return "until God".

Note that this odd phrase – *Shuva 'Ad Hashem* – to "return UNTIL God" shows up in several passages, including ours (v. 2), earlier in D'varim (4:30) and in the famous passage from Hoshea (14:2). What does this mean?

Again – when the sense of desparation and hopelessness is coupled with the realization of how far from God we have moved – the immediate and (hopefully) instinctive reaction is to try to "come back" – to restore some type of relationship with God and to return to Him. It is the Divine embrace, the security of God's Presence, which is the immediate and urgent goal of this type of "Ba'al Teshuvah".

This is, indeed, the type of Teshuvah mentioned in the first instance – "you shall return UNTIL God and hearken to His voice"; there is no mention here of specific actions or even of commitments.

It seems that this theory cannot even withstand the rest of the verse: The end of the phrase implies a commitment to Mitzvot: "just as I command you today". This phrase, however, should not be confused with the commitment to Mitzvot mentioned later. Here, the phrase implies that the Ba'al Teshuvah (in this case, the entire nation), will return and seek out a relationship with God, just as he {Mosheh – remember, this is Sefer D'varim} commanded them to do. In other words, the return to God is itself part of Mosheh's charge to the people.

When we look ahead to v. 8 – what we have dubbed "The Second Teshuvah" – we note that the tenor of commitment has changed. No longer are we returning "UNTIL" (*'Ad*) God – we are now returning to hear His voice – meaning "to observe all of His commandments...".

In other words, whereas the first step in Teshuvah (we now realize that there aren't two different types of Teshuvah – rather, there are two steps in the process) is exclusively the desire to return to God – to "reach Him" – the next step involves a full commitment to learning (hearkening to His voice – which here, by context, implies study of His laws) and observance.

We can now reexamine the sequence in our Parashah and find a remarkable statement about the power of Teshuvah (this is an edited cut-and-paste job from above; compare the two carefully):

- 1) We will reflect on the fulfillment of the blessing and curse – at that point, we will be spread out and (we assume) under foreign rule among the nations. (v. 1)
- 2) We will return "until" (Heb. *'Ad*) God, listening to His voice (v. 2) – i.e. the nation will experience a desire to come close to God.
- 3) God will restore our fortunes, returning us back to our Land from all corners of the diaspora (vv. 3-5)
- 4) God will purify our hearts to worship Him completely (v. 6)
- 5) God will curse our enemies (v. 7)
- 6) We will return "fully" to God, studying His Torah and committing to complete observance of His commands (v. 8)
- 7) God will make us prosper and take delight in us (v. 9)

What an amazing statement: In order for God to restore us, to purify our hearts and to achieve peace and security in our Land, all we need is to desire to return to God – to seek out His voice. Once He has fulfilled the “intermediary” promises, then we are fully expected to step up the commitment to complete Teshuvah, as indicated in v. 8. Only then will God fully take delight in us and grant us prosperity.

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